



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT

(Hansard)

Volume 14

(21 January 2002 to 3 March 2002)

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Volume 14

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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

(*Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair*)

Monday 21 January 2002

*The Assembly met at noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).
Members observed two minutes' silence.*

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE

Resolved:

That Mrs Annie Courtney replace Ms Carmel Hanna on the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.
— [Mr Tierney]
— [Dr McDonnell]

ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Resolved:

That Ms Patricia Lewsley replace Ms Carmel Hanna on the Committee for the Environment.
— [Mr Tierney]
— [Dr McDonnell]

CARE IN THE COMMUNITY

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the increasing difficulties facing those who have to rely on community care packages and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take action to remedy this situation.

If the mark of a civilised society is the way in which we care for our sick, elderly, disabled people or people with mental health problems, clearly we here have some way to go. A key component of our Health Service is what goes on under the heading community care. I have tabled the motion because there are glaring problems with that provision. When we examine what is happening on the ground, we see that community care is something of a misnomer.

At the moment, practically every trust is reporting that it cannot meet the needs of those who require home help and other forms of domiciliary care. In many instances the community care budgets ran out some time ago. In my area, the Sperrin Lakeland Trust reports that it needs an additional £700,000 to provide for the assessed needs of the sick and the elderly.

In many cases, the only way in which home help services can be found for new patients is by cutting back on the home help hours of existing patients. Every week, cases are reported to my constituency office and, I am sure, to the offices of other Members of the Assembly, which show that the level of community care is inadequate. I know of a 90-year-old man being looked after in his home by his 80-year-old wife. They receive only two hours of home help a week. Money is so scarce in the system that the sick and the old are being asked by some trusts to use their own pensions and benefits to pay for community care packages.

I am not suggesting that the state of community care — and it is in a sorry state — is the fault of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. In Britain during the 1990s, expenditure on health and personal social services rose by 57%, while in Northern Ireland it rose by 35%. That shows how our Health Service was short-changed under direct rule. That was the difference in funding during the 1990s, and from reports in the media we know that the Health Service in Britain is breaking down. We need to have that historical underfunding put right and made good, and to do that we require the combined efforts of the Treasury, the Executive and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

At Executive level, finding the resources to meet the pressing demand for additional domiciliary care

and day-care packages must be made a priority. However, the crisis in community care is not solely about funding. There are steps that the Minister can and must take. The administration of the Health Service has to be streamlined, and the current unwieldy structures have to be sorted out, because they are contributing to the shambolic community care provision. The Health Service needs less bureaucracy and more efficiency, which is something that the Minister and her Department must tackle now.

The inability to deliver meaningful care packages impacts directly on other budgets and contributes directly to bed blocking and spending inefficiencies in the Health Service. People in hospitals are suffering. People are waiting for heart surgery, joint replacements and for fractures to be dealt with. Youngsters are waiting to have their tonsils removed, while their education and health suffer. The list is growing. We have cases of patients, particularly elderly people, being kept in hospital at a cost of up to £900 a week, and no clinical reason is given. The explanation is that no money is apparently available in the home help service to keep people in the comfort of their homes.

Why does this happen? There is clear mismanagement when £100 or £150 a week cannot be found for the home help service, and £900 is spent instead. That is being caused by our crazy maze of health trusts.

Places in nursing homes for those who are unable to return home cost between £300 and £350 a week, but no money is available to provide them. In one case, a lady was kept in hospital for eight weeks solely because no money was available to fund a place for her in a residential nursing home. If that one bed had been available during an eight-week period, how many more people could have been treated?

Community care provision is also vital for cancer patients. There are 8,500 new cancer patients in Northern Ireland every year, and increasing numbers — up to 90% — are being looked after in the community, in accordance with medical recommendations. In some areas the demand for palliative care packages has increased rapidly. The social work department in one of Northern Ireland's four cancer units reported recently that it receives an additional 17 referrals every month. The good news is that the number of cancer patients who make a full recovery is on the increase, but there is a serious shortage of skilled staff to deliver palliative care. The level of that care is patchy across the North, and in some areas the voluntary sector is too heavily relied upon. The voluntary agencies do outstanding work, and we are all aware of examples of that, but that sector cannot be expected to do everything.

The Alzheimer's Disease Society recently issued a report on community care support for people who suffer from dementia. In Northern Ireland, 20,000 people,

many of whom are under the age of 65, suffer from dementia. That report advises that, in many cases, although carers felt that they needed more support, they were experiencing cutbacks. Seven out of 10 carers had to contend with regular sleep disturbances, yet help is rarely available during the night; the availability of such provision varies according to where the carer lives. That encapsulates the inconsistent approach by our health authorities to community care.

One of the most damning messages of that report is that many of the carers surveyed said that they found it difficult to obtain information from social services bodies. Many described the procedure as a battle. It is wrong that people who are trying to care at home for a family member with a distressing illness should have to battle to get information. The point was made in the last couple of weeks at a meeting of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety when members heard the case of a carer who had to look after two members of his family in distressing circumstances. That carer experienced great difficulty in getting any information from the system.

These responses sum up what many feel is wrong about the way in which healthcare is provided — it is no longer the service that it should be. It has become, from the carers' point of view, a system that they do not understand. Putting aside the fact that money is not forthcoming, there is no excuse for the lack of availability of information for carers. I ask the Minister to take every step necessary to remedy the problem.

12.15 pm

Mental healthcare is another important area which, as many Members know, relies heavily on the voluntary sector. The shortage of skilled staff is a serious problem, and mental healthcare also suffers from the problems that affect other areas of healthcare. Recently, I learnt that seven people who were medically fit for discharge were not released from Holywell Hospital because no care packages were available to assist them or their families.

At the other end of the spectrum, some people are released from hospital with little or no domiciliary care available to help them in their home surroundings, which is an important element of the recovery process. The only contact that they have is with the social worker who comes to assess their needs. The social worker can move only those individuals who have no movement onto waiting lists.

Furthermore, there is the question of parity of expenditure. People in rural communities are entitled to the same level of community care and access to services as people in urban areas. There is a disparity of expenditure between health boards and trusts on care programmes for the elderly. Some urban trusts have a greater per capita expenditure on such programmes.

For example, in 1999-2000, in the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust area the per capita expenditure figure was £3,200; in the Foyle Trust area the per capita figure was £3,300; but in the Sperrin Lakeland Trust area the figure was £2,700. I will examine those services to check that they have been, or will be, rural proofed to ensure that people who live in rural areas are not being disadvantaged.

I have mentioned only some of the anomalies, inadequacies and inconsistencies of the current community care provision. There are many other examples: stroke patients facing lengthy delays for physiotherapy; people waiting for assessments by occupational therapists for home adaptations; and people waiting for speech therapy — the list goes on.

The Minister was due to receive the preliminary report on care in the community last year. I would like the Minister to announce the outcome of that review. I would also like to see a clear plan of action and a definite management strategy to sort out the mess that carries the misnomer of care in the community.

The inadequacies of the Health Service are having a detrimental effect, not only on the patients and those who care for them, but on the people who work in the service. I want to acknowledge the work that is done by all health workers. In the face of all the difficulties, they endeavour to provide the best possible care.

It is not a matter of simply throwing money at the problem. Undoubtedly, resources are a key element in tackling the growing mess. However, resources must be part of a clearly developed strategy for the whole of the North, not a sticking plaster for the trust that happens to shout loudest about the crisis. If the Minister does not initiate such a strategy quickly, undoubtedly we will face a worse crisis.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ten Members wish to speak in the debate, for which just over two hours have been set aside. Therefore I ask Members to accept a limit of 10 minutes for their speeches. That limit will not apply to the Minister, or to Mr Gallagher, who will wind up the debate.

Mr Berry: I commend Mr Gallagher for raising the important issue of care in the community. The motion reminds us that health provision is not what it should be. While newspaper headlines tell the public about elderly people blocking beds, they do not reveal the human face of those involved.

Recently I had to deal with two constituents who had been admitted to Daisy Hill Hospital. Both were well enough to leave the hospital after having had successful operations and receiving care, but they remained there for 13 weeks. One needed a care in the community package that was not available at that time due to lack of funding. The other needed residential

care, which was also unavailable for the same reason. The cost to the Health Service for those 13 weeks runs into many thousands, the vast bulk of which could have been saved had those patients been able to get out of hospital sooner. If it costs a hospital around £1,300 a patient, a week, those two patients were costing Daisy Hill Hospital and the trust £2,600 a week, which adds up to £33,000 over 13 weeks.

These are not unusual cases. The average overstay in some hospitals across Northern Ireland is five weeks. Hospitals are losing a fortune in that area alone. If each of the 150 delayed discharges in December and January were patients who had spent five extra weeks in hospital, each occupying a bed, the cost to the Health Service would be £975,000. That is probably a conservative figure. I suspect that the real cost is around £1,000,000. Had the Department got its act together and applied a holistic approach, it could have saved thousands of pounds every week for care in the community. Those savings could have been used to increase the money paid to the providers of nursing and residential homes, which are closing at an alarming rate. That point does not seem to have registered with the Department, judging by its answers to written questions on this important subject.

While I welcome extra resources for care in the community, that is only part of the problem in the Health Service. The Department seems unable to see the whole picture. There is a problem recruiting and retaining carers and home helps. That has been made acute in places where there are large retail centres close by. Recently I held discussions with the chief executives of two different trusts. They said that they were having a difficult time recruiting carers and people to look after the elderly. In some areas carers are leaving to take up jobs in large shopping centres and retail units where the pay, hours and conditions are better. There is a rising staffing problem, not only in hospitals but also for care in the community. To provide extra resources is good, but if the personnel are not there, we are back to square one.

What is needed is an overall approach by which patients can be discharged into the community or into residential homes on a temporary basis, with resources and staff available to ensure that patients do not end up in hospital unnecessarily, as they do at present. With a clear vision and will it is realistically possible to reduce bed blocking to an acceptable level without the expenditure of huge resources. Savings in one area will more than cover what is paid out in the other.

Until this problem is tackled across the board, piecemeal actions will not resolve it. The longer it remains unresolved, the bigger it will become, until hospitals are no longer physically able to take in any new patients. That is already happening on an infrequent basis. It does not take a genius to realise that at the

current rate, it will become a permanent reality. It is important that this issue has been highlighted today. As Mr Gallagher said, it is not about funding or resources alone, but about having a holistic approach to the important issues of care, and carers, in the community.

I commend and support the motion.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I commend Tommy Gallagher for moving the motion. I agree that we are judged by how we treat the most vulnerable in society. Steps must be taken within the administration of the Health Service. However, similar steps must be taken in the review of public administration. At what stage is that review? The Executive initiated it, but the administrative issue within the Health Service, boards and trusts also needs to be addressed.

I welcome the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's announcement of a 1,000 extra community care packages, which was mentioned by the last two Members who spoke. I am glad that the Minister is here to explain the detail of the package.

The last debate before the Christmas recess was on the Health Service, during which my Colleague, John Kelly, and I tabled an amendment that called on the Executive to provide additional money to tackle issues in the Health Service. That was six weeks ago. At what stage are we now? Every party agreed that additional money was needed. Areas that must be targeted include the acute sector, community care, young people and the elderly.

Everyone is aware of problems within the occupational therapy (OT) sector, which often have knock-on effects for community care packages. The Minister's officials and officials from the Housing Executive held discussions to tackle OT waiting lists. Measures to solve those problems may involve simply installing a handrail, but a patient is unable to leave hospital until that handrail is installed. How have the discussions progressed? We talk about collective responsibility. Those issues may not necessarily be the responsibility of the Minister or her Department; they may be another Department's responsibility. The issues must be targeted.

Tommy Gallagher said that the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill is currently at Committee Stage. I welcome that Bill. The Health Committee is going through it clause by clause. Examination of the Bill highlighted some problems that carers and their families face. Those problems are being targeted, and the Bill should be brought before the Assembly shortly.

As I said, we could debate the motion all day.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I hope not.

Ms Ramsey: I do not suggest for one minute that I will do so or that one problem in the Health Service is more important than any other. The Health Service

needs substantial investment. The money must be provided to target the problems.

In a way, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety pre-empted this debate. Although the Committee supported the Minister's bids and welcomed the money that was received, it also supported calls for additional money. The Committee, which closely scrutinises those issues, wrote to both the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and to the Minister of Finance and Personnel to request an urgent meeting to discuss not only the money that is needed for this year and future years, but for the years of serious underfunding that the Health Service has endured. It is more than ten weeks since that meeting was requested, and it has yet to be timetabled.

Although I welcome the additional money that was announced in previous months, some of that money — if not a large percentage of it — is a one-off.

It does not ensure forward planning or allow a three-year or five-year plan to be implemented. The additional money is a one-off. That needs to be questioned.

12.30 pm

This matter is a test for the Executive because the Programme for Government informed us that health, along with other matters, was a priority. We need to do more than talk about it; we must ensure that the money is allocated to, and invested in, that priority. Rather than have announcements of one-off amounts, we should ensure that money is in place for the long term.

I welcome the motion and congratulate Tommy Gallagher for moving it. My party supports it. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCarthy: I too thank Tommy Gallagher for raising this vital matter on the Floor of the House. Care in the community is a very worthwhile policy, which has the support of many people. However, sufficient funding is needed to deliver a good, comprehensive community care service. Funding is vital and must be provided. I appreciate the Minister's presence today to hear our concerns.

Community care should be defined as helping those who cannot manage on their own at home. It means helping such people to live in the community in their homes or, perhaps, in sheltered housing or residential care. Different people need different forms of assistance. A range of services can enable some people to stay in their own homes. That is what they want, and everyone should endeavour to bring that about. For others, a place in sheltered housing or in residential care might be more appropriate.

Care in the community is sometimes thought of as only for people who are being discharged from hospital, but many other people need that extra care at home. It

may involve the provision of aids or appliances to assist them at home, meals on wheels, a home help service or perhaps day-care respite. Someone with a learning disability or someone who has suffered a stroke might require care and assistance. The list goes on.

Tribute must be paid to all those who care for our sick or elderly people. It must be said that carers do far more than they are paid to do — and they do it out of love and compassion for the people who are so dependent on outside help.

I appeal to the Minister to ensure that sufficient funding is in place to meet the needs of care in the community throughout Northern Ireland. I support the motion.

Mr C Wilson: This is an important debate. In considering an issue which affects the most vulnerable in society — the elderly who are physically or mentally infirm — we need to give serious thought to how we deal with the crisis.

A report last year disclosed the alarming figure of 162 delayed discharges in the Eastern Health Board's area. Bodies often find innovative ways of publishing statistics and information to hide the true plight. A more accurate definition of "delayed discharges" might therefore be that at the end of September 2001 162 people were "imprisoned in hospital". They were unable to go home because proper care was not available. Families were unable to have their loved ones brought home from hospital and provided with care packages or have them discharged to proper care in residential or private nursing homes.

The situation is even more alarming. A report issued by the boards' independent health watchdog body has revealed that 333 people are at home waiting for care packages. That is a great indictment of the Department, because Member after Member has referred to the cost of providing care for these patients who are now imprisoned in hospital. I ask Mr Gallagher to check his figures; he mentioned a cost of £900 a week for bed blocking, but I understand that the figure is nearer to £1,500 a week. Of course, that does not include the capital costs that are normally there for private healthcare.

It is a disgrace: those patients who are blocking beds, against their wishes and those of their families, are denying care to hundreds of patients who require it daily and weekly. Various Members have asked for additional funding to be thrown at this, but we are acutely aware that it is unlikely that that would solve the immediate problem because the amount of funding that would be required is not readily available.

Therefore, I challenge the Department to do what it should have done — grasp the nettle and look at how care can be provided within existing funds and budgets. It should use the money to purchase the care

required in a way that will provide the maximum amount of care for the greatest number of people. We would all like additional funding, and it is essential that additional funding be found, but the Department has been lacking.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Member for giving way. If I am wrong, I am willing to be corrected. However, I understand that the Member may have a personal interest in this particular industry. Perhaps he should declare it.

Mr C Wilson: I will declare it again. I have made it clear on numerous occasions that I have a personal interest in private nursing care. I represent a body that has spent many long hours with the Department, the trusts and the boards in an attempt to resolve the anomaly. I have often pointed out that a crisis was looming in that industry.

The crisis in the private nursing sector was front-page news in the 'Belfast Telegraph' and received other media coverage. The Sandown Group, one of the largest providers of care, was recently placed in the hands of the receiver. That must be of concern to the Assembly and the Department. It would be worse if, regardless of the Assembly's efforts to find money to provide the care that is essential for these elderly, vulnerable people, it was then the case that there was nowhere to place them following their discharge from hospital.

That is a real problem that the Assembly and the Department must consider. Across the United Kingdom, the private sector is suffering as a result of the statistics that I quoted. Patients who have been assigned beds in a private home, and people whose families have selected a home for them, find that the funding is not available for the care. Something is wrong, and that must be obvious even to people without any experience in the fields of healthcare or care in the community. There must be something wrong with how the money in the system is being allocated.

I am sure that many Members are aware of the ridiculous cases of home care packages that are provided at costs of up to £2,000 a week. They deprive other people of services. The main argument is that the situation depends on the way that funding is allocated — on the Department's budgeting and system of allocating money.

Anyone who looked at the situation in a sane or rational fashion would see that it makes sense to move someone out of a hospital bed, costing up to £1,500 a week, into the private sector or to provide a home care package that costs substantially less.

I appeal to the Department to do a fundamental root-and-branch reappraisal of the way in which care is purchased and provided in the community. Some patients are bed blocking, while others are sitting at

home. The Department should examine ways in which it can alleviate this problem.

As elected representatives, we are all aware of the plight of elderly people who have to provide care for their husbands, wives and others who receive no assistance. At a time when we are moving to provide free care at the point of delivery, we start to hear stories of elderly people having to fund their care from their pensions or whatever small savings they have. This is a matter of urgency, and if the Assembly is wise, it will highlight the plight of those who require our help.

Mr Deputy Speaker: All Members have been limited to 10 minutes.

Ms McWilliams: I thank Mr Tommy Gallagher for tabling the motion. It could not have come at a more important time. The serious situation that we face in the Health Service is caused by a combination of the problems in hospitals and community, primary-care services. If we get this right, we can probably find our way through the crisis.

We have seen enormous changes over the years in the way in which illnesses are dealt with. At one time people with tuberculosis were sent to separate facilities. There were cottage hospitals with convalescence and rehabilitation facilities. These have all been closed. People who need rehabilitation treatment or time to convalesce must now stay in hospital. People are moved from hospitals into nursing homes if community care is not available.

If we approached the problem in a different way, we could save a great deal of funding and provide better services, particularly for the elderly and the disabled. We must change the way that we think about health services — we must change their delivery and the culture that surrounds them. To do this, we must take account of a huge rise in the elderly population. Between 1995 and 2025, the number of people over the age of 80 will increase by 50%, and the number of people over the age of 90 will also double. We cannot expect hospitals to deal with an elderly person every time he or she gets a chest infection. When an elderly person becomes ill, the GP is called. If the GP cannot deal with that person, he or she is admitted to hospital.

Having visited several trusts, I am aware that many have recently introduced some innovative schemes, such as intensive home care beds. These enable staff to provide intravenous medicine, carry out blood transfusions and other processes that require complex nursing. The trusts have started some wonderful programmes. The Down Lisburn Health and Social Services Trust, for example, has introduced the Hospital at Home programme and a rehabilitation service for stroke patients called Step Down Care as well as many other interesting services. However, these require 24-hour, seven-days-a-week health and social care

services to be in place. The culture of the trusts must change. They must provide nurses in the community.

12.45 pm

I was heartened when the South and East Belfast Trust told me that nurses want to work in the community and that it has 60 applications for every community nursing post, while hospitals have problems recruiting nurses. If we were to reorient nursing services to deal with patients and the elderly in the community, we could avoid bed blocking, delayed discharges and trolley waits. Frequent readmissions to hospitals, risks of pressure sores, exposure to infections, institutionalisation, dependence, depression and confusion present major challenges to a system that requires major service redesign. We must change the way in which we deliver services soon. I am heartened that a community care strategy is being reviewed, and I hope that it will be put in place shortly.

We will need a well-balanced supporting infrastructure between the primary healthcare services and the GPs, and that is why, after April, we must get primary care right. We also need a menu of services so that patients can be maintained and rehabilitated and can receive acute care in their homes. We must stop equating acute care with hospitals — acute care can be delivered to patients in their homes in a complex way by integrated teams of physiotherapists, occupational therapists, nurses and doctors working together.

A thriving independent sector is also needed. I am aware that there are problems with the nursing homes. The Sandown Group has recently gone into receivership. There is a problem with the elderly not being able to find places because of fees. However, that is a debate for another day.

I have just read a recent report from the Northern Ireland Ombudsman called 'Facing the Future'. In it, the Ombudsman says that it is interesting that the nature of the complaints that he has received recently has changed and that the majority of complaints that he now receives concern community healthcare. He says that that is because of the non-provision of community services and the lack of resources. He believes that, although it may not be a matter of maladministration, it clearly is an issue when people who have a statutory right to services, and who have been assessed for those services, are not given them.

Last week, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety dealt with the Committee Stage of a piece of legislation that, again, introduces a statutory right to care assessments. I told the Committee that there is no point in that legislation being introduced if the services are not then put in place. Otherwise, people will have their needs assessed and be made aware of the services to which they are entitled, but they will then be told that they cannot avail themselves of those services because they do not exist. Tom

Frawley tells us that his mailbag is full of complaints about this. Perhaps we would prefer the Northern Ireland Ombudsman — who is also the Assembly Ombudsman — to be dealing with other kinds of complaints, rather than have his mailbag full of complaints about the lack of community care services.

Clearly, a fundamental review is required. We must think about the services that we provide. My vision for the future of the Health Service is that hospitals will deal only with surgery — be it elective or emergency — and that the majority of people, including those suffering from mental illness or disabilities and the frail elderly, will be treated in their homes or by the independent sector in the residential and nursing sector, with respite services also in place.

We cannot go on simply saying that if we close convalescent and rehabilitation services, those services should be provided in hospitals. Hospitals do not have the resources to provide them. However, there are many dedicated professionals who have the necessary skills but are unable to use them, for example, in the mental illness field. A wonderful initiative has been introduced — the Thorn nurse training initiative — but patients who leave psychiatric units to return to the community quickly find themselves back in psychiatric hospitals, because the nurses have not been able to apply their wonderful skills and give the services that psychiatric patients need in the community.

They are intensive and will require significant extra resources. However, in the end, those resources will be more cost efficient.

Mr McFarland: The debate on care in the community is ongoing — in fact, I think that our last debate on it was in October 2001. I welcome Mr Gallagher's motion today, which will, I hope, continue to highlight the issue.

Many would argue that solving the community care problems is the key to solving the difficulties in the acute hospitals, and Members have referred to that already. New patients referred by primary care cannot get into hospital in the first place because recuperating patients cannot get out. It is interesting that some 43% of community care packages are home care packages. Indeed, 86% of community care packages are for the elderly. Those are all important, particularly the packages for the elderly.

Although the Minister has given money towards home care, residential care is equally important. I understand that statutory homes, in many cases, have closed and are continuing to close. However, the most frightening aspect involves the private sector homes, which, in theory, should take over from the statutory sector to deal with the problem. Private sector homes are now closing because the amount per head that is allocated for looking after patients is not enough. What is the Minister doing about it? This has the potential to be a

disaster. Even if money were put in, we would have a mammoth problem if there was nowhere for those patients to go to be looked after physically in the community. The Minister should give some thought to that.

I want to raise the unfairness in the present system of charges for personal and nursing care. In Scotland, free personal and nursing care is to be introduced from April. England and Wales have free nursing care. Is it right that people who spend their lives saving end up in their old age having to pay for their care? People who have paid their taxes, assuming that the NHS would look after them, suddenly now find that that is not the case. Indeed, their homes are at risk. The implications of that are that you should all live life to the full, forget about saving and squander your money, because that way the system will look after you. I am afraid that you just lose it all at the end if you are prudent about your affairs throughout your life. That is a frightening thought for all those who have been prudent. Elderly patients' houses are at risk, and I understand that there is a deferred payment scheme in England, Scotland and Wales to allow the burden of losing your house to be eased. Does the Minister have any plans to introduce such a system here?

Care in the community is not just about money; it is also about organisation. The Minister should look at the whole issue again with renewed vigour. I support the motion.

Mrs Courtney: I support the motion by my Colleague Mr Gallagher, and I thank him for bringing it to the House today.

In many instances care in the community is assumed to refer to the elderly, but that is only part of the story. Trusts responsible for community care have to ensure that resources are sufficient to meet increasing demands, not only in elderly care but also across a wide range of other services. Chapter 9 of the Hayes Report dealing with primary care states

“our analysis strongly suggested that patients are being treated in hospitals in Northern Ireland who would be treated in the community elsewhere.”

We should, therefore, reduce pressure on the acute hospital sector by treating more patients in the community, provided that levels of resources, organisation and motivation in primary care are sufficient.

The Department of Health and Social Service's consultation paper, 'Fit for the Future', presented health and personal social services as a single, integrated service, centred on primary care. 'Putting it Right' encouraged general practitioners to work more closely with hospital-based medical teams to extend their skills, thus enabling more services to be developed in the community. For example, minor surgery is now performed at health centres.

'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care' points out that close links between primary care and hospital

services are essential if people are to receive treatment in the right setting at the right time and if they are to be able to move easily through the health and social care system. General practitioners are effectively the gatekeepers of the wider systems of care, and they have a key role to play in deciding what kind of care, treatment or support is necessary to meet people's needs.

Equally important is the fact that primary care is often a bridge to back-to-normal health for those who have received more specialist care. Effectiveness in guiding patients in and out of the hospital system is essential if the Health Service is to provide the service for which it was created — appropriate treatment at the appropriate time and free at the point of delivery. When that service fails to deliver, as it currently appears to be doing, there are problems, and we must ask ourselves why.

Health and personal social services are underfunded and have been for decades. However — and this is critical — some figures suggest that the situation has worsened under devolution, despite extra resources. For example, between March 1996 and March 2001 waiting lists jumped by 700%. Trust deficits have more than doubled in the periods 1998-99 and 1999-2000, despite a 7.2% increase in the Budget announced in October 2000 and allocations of £17 million in November 2000, £14.5 million in January 2001 and £18 million in February 2001. The total budget available for 2002-03 will be 37% larger — an increase of £687 million — than when the Minister took office. There is evidence that the Executive and the Assembly are committed to the Health Service, but, I contend, there are arguments about management as well as money.

Resources are only one element, but we have a responsibility to ensure good management and accountability for the way in which they are used. We can all quote instances of patients lying in acute beds waiting for beds in the community, and we must ask why. Usually the reason given is that trust responsible does not have the resources to buy more beds. Nursing homes are closing, and it has already been pointed out that the Sandown Group has gone into receivership. That is sad, because many people depend on nursing homes.

Nursing homes can no longer cope and give adequate care to those who need it. Their allocation is less than £400 a week a patient, yet it costs approximately £1,500 a week to keep a patient in the acute sector. At the end of 2001 the Ulster Hospital had up to 42 beds with delayed discharges, and it is a similar story in all acute hospitals. The Hayes Report stated that 10% to 15% of acute beds were not available because patients were waiting to be transferred to the community.

The last thing that is needed is another review, given that most reviews to date have not been acted on. That point was highlighted in a written answer on 18 January

2001 from the Minister to a question that had been put by my Colleague, Mr Bradley. He had asked her

“to detail (a) the number of reviews that have been initiated by her Department or its agencies since devolution; and (b) the number that were ongoing when she took office”.

The Minister replied:

“Since the establishment of the Executive in December 1999 I have initiated six major reviews. My Department has also initiated a further 15 professional reviews/studies. Some 23 reviews/studies have been initiated by HSS boards, trusts and agencies. Fourteen reviews, of which 12 were departmental, were ongoing at December 1999.”

There have been many reviews.

1.00 pm

There is still a lack of resources, but we must ask how the current money is being spent. For example, how much of the additional £687 million was spent on consultancy fees, public relations and reviews? The audit trail is so poor that there is no way that we can find out. Instead of constantly referring back to underfunding under direct rule, the Minister must accept responsibility for answering those concerns if confidence in the Health Service is not to dissipate completely.

Mr Shannon: I am encouraged that the motion is being debated today, but it must be stated that it is ridiculous that we are once again pleading on behalf of our needy constituents to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make the Health Service work here.

A week ago, I watched her agree with a television news reporter that the situation was grave. However, she refused to reveal what she and her Department were going to do to improve it. I also noted that she did not take up Dr Maguire's challenge to experience life on a ward that has not been prepared for her arrival and which is overrun with patients sitting on trolleys because there are no beds available. The Minister does not know what a real ward is like, because she does not make unannounced visits. If she did so, she would see that chief executives do not want to advertise the conditions under which doctors and nurses are suffering day and night. The Minister has certainly not ventured into the Strangford constituency to talk to people who are currently receiving, or waiting for, community care. The Minister for such a failing Department should at least make the effort to look interested.

The lack of adequate funding has overstretched the resources of the whole of the National Health Service. Some elderly and disabled patients are not being allowed home until adequate care facilities become available, and then no community care places are available anyway. Other patients are let out of hospital too early, only to return with complications or to avail of extensive care packages. If there were enough money for the correct

and adequate community care packages to address that need, a huge burden would be lifted from the Health Service. Perhaps Sinn Féin can lend a hand now that it is gaining four new office allowances from Westminster.

Recently, the Minister gave the go-ahead for pay rises for chief executives. Has she given any thought to the people in the country? People in my constituency wait for years for hip replacements, and due to the delay they must have community care to help them wash, dress, prepare food and keep their houses clean — the very basics. They were angry to hear that the Government in England have enabled those who have waited more than six months for operations to travel abroad for treatment; some of those patients went to France last week. Is the Minister going to make provision for such facilities here? That would considerably ease the burden on the community care departments, not only in my constituency of Strangford but in the Province as a whole.

The Ulster Community and Hospitals Health and Social Services Trust needs £20 million to sort out the deficiencies in its community care department. The entire Province got £13 million. Is it just me, or is there something lacking in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety? The Department and its Minister do not recognise the daily problems faced by the trusts in the Province and the fact that it is real people whom they are dealing with and not just numbers. We see real people and their problems every day. The amount of money required to help such people is phenomenal, but there is no way around the fact that it is needed. Although the Minister may try to ignore the situation, she cannot.

People in her constituency must also be waiting for community care; their home helps' time is also being cut back and rearranged to cover the increasing number of people needing care. I would love to know exactly what she says to those people, because I, for one, am fed up listening to the same old platitudes and trying to reassure my constituents that the issue will be addressed in the Assembly. It is being addressed today, but what will the answers be? The situation worsens day by day for many of them.

Each year, the Ulster Community and Hospitals Health and Social Services Trust sets out its targets and goals. With disgust, its representatives told me that they could not achieve those aims because they receive no financial back-up or support. They want to provide the service, but they cannot do so because the money is not forthcoming. They say that they must provide £10,000 for each person who needs care management. Using this figure as a barometer, only 1,300 people across the Province were helped by the release of £13 million to the National Health Service.

If all the money went into the community care department, a minimum number of people would be helped. This means that a great many people are being

left in pain and without help or the facilities to help themselves. My constituency is laughingly called "better off", but many of the elderly and disabled are living on the poverty line and need this help to survive each day. It is not a service — it is a necessity. It gives many people the independence and standard of living that should be the bare minimum for anyone in our society. I urge the Minister to look at her Department and realise the hardships that many people face. It reminds me of the workhouses in Dickens's novels, and people in this country deserve better. They have paid their National Insurance to have this service, and it is failing them miserably day-by-day. I support the motion.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I too support the motion. I pay tribute to the carers who are working under very difficult circumstances to maintain a service to the elderly. I congratulate the Minister for bringing forward 1,000 extra care packages this year. Sometimes we overlook — for whatever reason, political or otherwise — some of the positive aspects of what is happening in the Health Service.

Jim Shannon's reference to being disappointed that the Minister did not visit his constituency is a revelation. I wish that he would carry that forward and encourage his Ministers to participate in the Executive to help in this very critical area to deliver a better Health Service to our community.

On the question of the Minister not going to the Downe Hospital, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety met with doctors and junior doctors before Christmas and agreed that it would visit the Downe Hospital, which it did last week. These sensationalisms do not help the Health Service and are detrimental to its conduct. Indeed, they do not have the agreement of many of the medical practitioners in the Health Service.

People are living longer, and I congratulate and concur with the review of the capitation formula that looks at this issue and attempts to provide funding for our increasingly ageing population. It is easy to make political capital out of the Health Service, and there is too much of that going on. I do not say that because I am a member of the same party as the Minister. I have an example of that. Before Christmas — I see Billy Hutchinson has left the Chamber — I had a case where an 80-year-old woman released from hospital could not get access to a wheelchair to be wheeled down a country lane to get some fresh air. When I rang the local trust, I was told that they did not have wheelchairs. When I probed further, it emerged that there were wheelchairs but that they were not being given out in case the trust ran out of wheelchairs and did not have the funding to provide more.

We have this layer in the Health Service. Certain boards are holding back what they have because they

are afraid that for some reason they will not get the funding to provide items such as incontinence pads for old people. In this case it was a wheelchair that the trust had to hand but was not giving out because it was afraid that it would not get funding for other wheelchairs. Then the trusts say that they would welcome complaints to the Department and the Minister. Trusts seem to be determined to direct as many complaints as possible to the Department without making reference to the resources that they already have available for those in the community who need them.

As my Colleague Sue Ramsey said, we could go on and on. In response to Tommy Gallagher's point about a health strategy, we cannot have one unless the necessary funding is provided. Finance Ministers Gordon Brown and Charlie McCreevy, when they provided the funds for a health service strategy, looked not only to the immediate health crisis, but five years ahead, in an attempt to prevent health service crises from recurring.

Any extra funding that the Minister may receive will still be inadequate to cater for the strategic view that the Health Service needs. That strategy should include the development of provision for the elderly, including pensioners such as you, Mr Deputy Speaker, Rev Robert Coulter and myself.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have just been advised that I should declare an interest in this matter.

Mr J Kelly: Perhaps I should have declared an interest before I started, unlike Cedric Wilson. A collaborative approach among all the political parties and by all medical practitioners is the only way to solve the immediate crisis in the Health Service and to provide a strategy.

Rev Robert Coulter: I apologise to the House for being late. I was hosting the Dalriada Doctor-on-Call group in the Long Gallery. I recommend that Members go along for five minutes to hear what representatives of that group have to say.

I thank Mr Gallagher for moving the motion. It is fitting that we should discuss the matter today. The problems that affect the community care sector have already been covered in the speeches that I have heard today. We all know what kind of Health Service we would like. However, we need to discuss not only what we should do to achieve that objective but what we can do in the short term to alleviate at least some of the problems that people face.

At present, I am dealing with the case of an elderly woman in her 80s, who lives alone, and who spent five weeks in hospital recently. When she was discharged, she needed access to oxygen at all times, and she depended on a neighbour for assistance. The hospital did not inform the woman's GP that she was being sent home. When the patient informed her GP, he contacted

the local trust, but it was 48 hours before a community worker visited her. There is something seriously wrong with the management of a system that allows such treatment to occur — that incident happened in the past two weeks.

1.15 pm

As the Minister has already said, we could ensure that the first priority for those who are responsible for sending patients home from hospital would be to have at hand the information for the patient's GP and a list of the patient's needs, medical or otherwise. It would not take a great amount of money to do that; it would not take a huge amount of administration. We are over-administered with 19 trusts, four boards, five agencies — a plethora of administration. It has also been suggested that we are going to set up four or five more committees in each board area. We need to adopt a sensible approach to what we can do in the short term to rectify the problem. It will not help to apportion blame or to throw money at the situation. Another consultation document will not help either. John Kelly hinted that if all those who are involved could get together to see what we could do in the immediate future, we could act immediately.

We need decisions at every level of community care. I recently realised that Homefirst Community Health & Social Services Trust, which is centred in Ballymena, is the largest community trust in the entire United Kingdom. When we examine the percentages, we see that Homefirst is being castigated because it cannot meet its needs. It covers one fifth of the entire population of Northern Ireland, so is it any wonder that we have problems? We need to focus on money and management. Although we can all say what system we should have, I appeal to the Minister and the Department to get together and stop blaming each other or anyone else. We need to see what we can do and then do it.

Mr Gibson: Many issues have been eloquently and adequately placed before the Assembly today. Indeed, no one has done that better than Rev Robert Coulter. I make a plea for one aspect because all the other areas have been well covered. In my constituency of West Tyrone the norm is for the family to care for aged relatives. Most Assembly Members welcome the fact that there are still those in the community who care for their elderly relatives. However, it is a punishment for one family member to do that under the present system. If people of working age give up their work to look after their elderly parents, they are reduced, even with income support, to giving 24-hour care on £77 a week. At the same time, they are further punished by having to give up their pension rights. In other words, they cannot receive any additional money. Family members are being punished for looking after their elderly relatives.

Although this is not the direct responsibility of the Minister, I appeal to her to deal with the matter.

Through the single equality Bill and section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 we have raised the expectation that we will give equal treatment, and I presume that that involves pay. We should reward those carers not for 24 hours' work but for at least eight hours' work. They do not ask for anything more; it is reasonable that they should be justly rewarded. The expectations that were raised by the lovely glossy magazines on the subject might then be met.

In the past, I presented to the House, in a puritanical fit, a pile of health documents produced in the past five years, and weighing some 17 stone, which were written, published and printed at a cost of millions of pounds. I make a plea this afternoon that, in the extended family care system, those who give up work to look after their kith and kin receive an adequate and fair reward for their input.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue as someone who is not a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Mr Gallagher, who shares my constituency, has raised issues that are also of concern to me and to constituents. The Minister has a difficult job trying to deal with all the issues and to act accordingly. The main problem that affects the health system is the inadequacy of budgets.

Community care is a sensitive but vital issue in rural areas. Mr Gallagher said that we no longer have the service that we should have, which implied that in the past we had a service that we could be proud of. That is not the case. The Thatcher years resulted in 14 years' destruction of the Health Service. In the 1980s and 1990s the Tory Governments made 3% cuts, year-on-year. Those trying to deal with the cutbacks were told that if they did not run the hospitals, private managers — now known as “roving managers” — would be brought in to do the work for them. I do not think that that approach worked. The Labour Government seem to be taking the same approach by giving money with one hand and taking it away with the other, as is evident from the cutbacks in hospitals, bed shortages, et cetera.

The increased elderly population, particularly in Fermanagh, will create difficulties in the provision of community care. People live longer than before. Although diseases such as tuberculosis no longer affect people, today's hospitals treat patients for chronic diseases such as strokes, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's disease and drug-related illnesses. There are not enough nurses in our hospitals, and nursing staff are usually rushed off their feet. They do not have enough time to care for patients properly, with the result that staff become sick due to stress and there are twice as many people on the payroll to cover those absences. In addition, winter pressures, which affect older people more than anyone else, create an extra burden.

Those factors create massive pressure for the Minister, and much of that problem is inherited. Is the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety looking after the needs of carers? Doctors in areas such as Fermanagh find it difficult to get carers. They get neither time off nor relief from their job. The financial situation of homes creates a further burden.

The Budget did not allocate enough money, and people's health is suffering. Poor housing is also a factor in ill health. In my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, 17% of the housing stock is in poor condition. Dampness and inadequate toilet facilities also affect people's health, particularly stroke patients and those with serious illnesses. I join John Kelly in welcoming the 1,000 care packages announced by the Minister.

There is poor access to hospital day care in rural areas. Since bus passes for pensioners were introduced, elderly people have been told that they cannot take taxis to hospital — they must use the bus. However, in our area there are some routes that have only one bus a week. Even Rural Lift does not allow bus passes to be used.

On the issue of healthcare in border areas, an all-Ireland approach is necessary. North and South could work together, for example, Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT). There are natural hinterlands. Mr Gallagher will know that villages such as Kiltyclogher and other cross-border villages have worked together in the past. They did not look towards Enniskillen and places that are 30 miles away.

Specialists are a massive cost in rural care. Social workers may visit one area or one patient at home. Other workers, such as health visitors and district nurses, have to be paid for their mileage. These are costs that did not occur previously when one general health carer was able to assess a patient's healthcare needs. That situation could be considered on a cross-border basis, between the Department of Health and Children in the South and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the North, in order to create savings and prevent duplication. In some cases, their base could be Letterkenny, which is a hell of a journey from border areas in south Fermanagh.

The Department of Health and Children in the South is trying to do something about it, although it inherited the health system in the 1920s from the British, which has not served the country well. They spent far too long working with the system rather than trying to dispose of it and have something better.

Is specialisation needed, with all its inherent cost? Of course there are issues such as litigation, changing times and skills to be taken into account. In the 1950s a patient undergoing a hernia operation, for example, might have spent four to six weeks recuperating in the hospital, whereas today it is a day procedure. In order

to keep up their skills, surgeons now have to perform at least 50 appendix operations a year.

The Minister has also announced a timetable for the establishment of local health and social care groups and the ending of GP fundholding, which has a tremendous impact in my area on delivering care.

Rural proofing is needed in applying the Noble formula in relation to deprivation. Per capita, Fermanagh has £31, in contrast to places like Derry, which has £84 per capita under that formula. What impact will that have across other Departments? Will they follow the Noble formula as a basis? Voluntary groups will discover that they are losing out under this formula.

People in rural areas also face health problems. I am a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and it has been brought to the Committee's attention that farmers face problems such as stress, depression and even suicide arising from factors such as low income, isolation and a lack of future prospects.

What help or counselling was provided to families or individuals in the wake of the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease? There was a helpline, but what follow-up help has there been in areas affected by foot-and-mouth disease, such as Newry and Armagh? What impact did the outbreak have on stress levels or the incidence of heart attacks, for example?

1.30 pm

I have mentioned issues that involve three Departments. Health is a cross-cutting issue, which involves other Departments besides Ms de Brún's. Farmers' families need help, especially if they have not received help with their financial situations. Ms de Brún has inherited the problem, which has been brought about by a lack of adequate finance.

Mr Gibson mentioned the inadequate benefit payments for people who have given up work. Does he not agree that that is an issue for the Minister for Social Development? As I have said, cross-departmental issues are involved.

Go raibh maith agat.

Rev Dr William McCrea: The debate is timely, although its subject has exercised the Assembly time and again. It is 2002, and the situation is the same as it was in 2001. We rehearse the problems, because that is what we have — a plethora of problems. We had them last year, and we had them the year before. We have had reviews, and we have had consultation documents. We have had reviews of reviews and reviews of consultation documents — but when will the Department and the Minister make decisions? We rehearse the problems in our debates, but decision-making is lacking.

The Minister, as the person who leads the Department, is responsible for overseeing what happens in her

Department. Every Department can rightly say that it needs adequate finances, but is that the only answer? Adequate finances have been provided across the water, but it has been like pouring water into a big hole — there has not been the required improvement in services to the public. We can see that happening in our Province. The Assembly has voted considerable amounts of money to the Health Service since devolution. However, when we ask whether we have seen the corresponding improvements, the answer is "No".

The Minister gave us the age-old statement — which, of course, leans towards the Labour Party — that we should blame the Conservatives. They are blamed for everything, even though they have not been in power for five years. When will the Minister take some responsibility for her Department, instead of blaming everybody else? Blaming everybody else for the problem is a cop-out. The real problem with the Department is that there have been no decisions. There has been no decisiveness at the top of the Administration and at the top of the Department on how to make real changes with the money that has been allocated.

Let us not turn up our noses at the amount of money that was allocated. Certainly, it is insufficient, but, when money is provided, improvements must be seen, and that has not happened.

It is true that we have an increasingly elderly population. It is also true that many of those elderly people feel totally deserted. They feel that politicians and the Administration have let them down. They worked hard, and, with the rest of the people of the United Kingdom, they built a service that was second to none. They were promised that they would be looked after from the cradle to the grave, but they have not received that care. In fact, at the most vulnerable time in their lives, they feel more deserted than ever.

Let us examine community care packages. If we want to know what community care means, we should ask the public. In reality, it means that people are thrown out of hospital into the community. Care packages are promised, but they are not provided. Rev Robert Coulter mentioned a case in his constituency. In my constituency, an 80-year-old lady who needed continual treatment was forced to leave hospital. She was sent home to be cared for by her 86-year-old brother, who was also ill. She was thrust back into the community.

The Assembly has discussed getting people out of hospital and back into community care. I believe in community care — we want to keep people in the community. However, it is not enough to use the verbiage without providing proper care for such people. That is not a criticism of those excellent workers in the Health Service and the community who are trying their utmost. Many are at their wits' end to know exactly where to go next, and whom to go to next, because such a demand

is placed on their time. They cannot cut themselves into a thousand pieces.

We have rehearsed the problems, and that is only right because we must bring this need before the Assembly constantly. The Department and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety need to take responsibility, because the Assembly cannot rely on the vision that the Minister recently published in the press. There is no vision. There is a verse of scripture, which Mr Coulter will know very well, that says:

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”.

Without a clear vision for the Health Service and community care, people will die. That is what is happening. So many elderly people await operations that I sometimes believe that there are those who almost hope that a person will die before the operation is performed, such is the crisis that the Health Service is in. The reviews and consultation documents are about how to close hospital facilities rather than meet the need in the community.

Some people have been sent to France for operations. I suppose that the next thing is that they will be sent to Russia, because they cannot have operations in Northern Ireland. That is a disgraceful situation that must not be allowed to continue. It is not only due to a lack of money, as one Member pointed out. Need must be targeted, and a vision must be carried through. Real decisions that will make a difference to Northern Ireland's community care and Health Service need to be taken. My hon Friend Mr Gibson talked about glossy documents. I am fed up looking at glossy documents that tell us how wonderful the provision is. Less should be spent on glossy documents, and more money should be put into getting people the operations and the community care that they need. I assure the House that that would go down much better with the people than documents that tell us what provisions there are for the elderly.

At the start of 2002, many families, as well as many elderly people, feel deserted. The burden is on them. I strongly believe that families have a responsibility for their elderly. That has always been a trait of good Ulster people — they cared for their fathers and mothers and sought to do their best. However, many families are being pushed over the limit; they are being used and abused. Whenever they look for help to enable them to keep their parents at home, they are faced with a blank look and no help at all. Many people in Northern Ireland feel that not only is the Health Service in crisis, and that the community care packages are in a critical situation, but that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has no idea what the answer is. That is the worst situation of all. There must be decisive decision-making and a clear vision of where the Health Service is going in the future.

I thank Mr Gallagher for his timely motion. I trust, as the year progresses, that we will see a true change for good in the lives and health of our people.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Uasal Gallagher as ucht na nithe tábhachtacha seo a chur faoi bhráid an Tí.

D'éist mé go cúramach leis na pointí fiúntacha a luaigh Comhaltaí le linn na díospóireachta agus is ábhar inní agam é chomh maith na deacrachtaí atá ann ag riar ar an mhéadú atá ag teacht ar éilimh ar phácaistí cúraim phobail.

Is eol do Chomhaltaí gur chuir mé cuid tionscnamh suntasach ar bun i réimse an chúraim phobail le linn na bliana seo caite. Sa bhliain airgeadais reatha leithroinn mé £2 mhilliún sa bhreis go sonrach do sholáthar cúraim phobail le 230 pacáiste breise a chur ar fáil os cionn an mhéid a bhí beartaithe, agus an bhliain airgeadais seo chugainn beidh fáil ar 1,000 pacáiste breise cúraim phobail.

I thank Mr Gallagher for bringing these important issues to the Floor of the House. I have listened carefully to Members' valuable points and share their concern about the difficulties in meeting the increasing demand for community care packages.

I will try to respond to many of the points. However, that will be difficult at times, as some very sane Members called for a fundamental re-examination of the Health Service on the one hand and for no more reviews on the other. Members also called on me to allocate more money to virtually every sector in health and social services but also to act within my existing budget. There was also a call for greater information to be given on what is available, and in the same debate there was a call for an end to documents and leaflets outlining what is available.

Members are aware of several significant community care initiatives that I have taken in the past year. In the current year, I have allocated an additional £2 million specifically for community care provision to deliver an additional 230 care packages over and above planned provision. Next year will see the introduction of a further 1,000 community care packages. The elderly, as the main users of community care, will gain substantially from that. More people will be cared for at home and in other community settings, and there will be a reduction in delayed discharges from hospital.

The packages will be a mixture of domiciliary and residential care and will go a long way towards easing the difficulties that are experienced by some people in getting access to support services in the community. I stress that I understand the extremely important point that community care is not just about delayed discharges from hospital or preventing people from going into hospital — it is about looking after the whole range of needs of those outside hospital.

Since I came into office, I have initiated five major reviews, as well as a routine quinquennial review of the Mental Health Commission. Members know that very distinct and specific actions have come from those. Comments made by Annie Courtney and Rev William McCrea about the reviews were rather unfortunate. Aside from the routine five-yearly review of the Mental Health Commission, two of the five major reviews were initiated within weeks of my taking office and have resulted in significant actions and benefits.

Following the pressures on health and social services during the outbreak of the flu-like illness in the winter of 1999-2000, two of my first actions as Minister were to ask the Chief Medical Officer to review intensive care provision and the chief inspector of social services to review community care. As a result of detailed information gathered during those reviews, extra intensive care and high-dependency beds were made available in the acute sector — a total of 33 since I came into office.

1.45 pm

A total of 230 extra community care packages were provided this year, with 1,000 more to follow in the next financial year. 'Facing the Future: Building on the lessons of winter 1999/2000' recommended a comprehensive review of community care policy. I endorsed that recommendation in October 2000. A project board with an independent chairperson was set up to conduct the review — users, providers and carers were represented on it. In July, August and September 2001, extensive consultation took place, which took on board the views of statutory and independent sector providers, voluntary organisations and the health and social care professions. The objective was to identify barriers to the delivery of community care services, to identify good practice in place across the North and to implement recommendations for short-term improvements. From the outset, we have not only sought extra resources in that area but have examined what could be done to improve existing areas, for example, we have sought to build on good practice. I welcome the comments made on major initiatives and on the good practice that has been employed in some trusts. I shall consider the review's findings.

Although the review is ongoing, action has been taken to identify a range of good practices in place in trusts and, where appropriate, to put similar schemes in other places across the North. People will see that, where improvements can be made quickly, necessary action will be taken.

Those who were in residential and nursing care homes before the introduction of community care in 1993 were given preserved rights to special rates of income support to meet the costs of their care. However, they were not included in the new health and social

services care arrangements at that time. Those residents are now being brought into care management arrangements, which, along with the transfer from social security of the related funding, is intended to give help and reassurance. Those people will, for the first time, be subject to an assessment of their needs under the care management arrangements, and, where necessary, those care needs will be met in a more appropriate manner.

The payment of residential allowance to those in independent sector accommodation who receive state assistance with their costs also went unchanged at that time. That created a perverse incentive to place people in care rather than keep them at home. That allowance will end for new residents but remain for those currently in receipt of it, and that will involve a funding transfer from social security. That funding will allow the trusts further flexibility to consider care at home rather than in a residential care setting.

I am aware of the difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff. The poor pay and conditions still experienced by many front-line care workers make it difficult to attract and retain staff. I shall continue to examine the scope available for providing additional funding from my allocation to address that matter.

On the statutory side, staff recruitment is a matter for each trust. I am aware that trusts continue to attempt to recruit staff as the need arises and to address recruitment and retention. Those issues will be addressed by a departmental working party that is currently developing a new health and social services workforce plan.

Another important point raised during the debate concerned delayed discharges. Delayed discharges show the difficulties faced by health and personal social services, especially when there is increased demand on services. The level of delayed discharge can peak during the winter months, but it now proves to be a more persistent feature of the pressure on services all year. We have seen the need to create additional services in the community to allow the earlier discharge of patients who are improving, so that they can be cared for in a proper nursing environment outside hospital. We are moving to address that need with whatever resources become available.

It is also necessary to support primary care with more resources, so that GPs and other primary care professionals can do more to deal with patients in the community and to prevent their being admitted into hospital. The recorded number of patients waiting for care packages in the community stands at over 400 at any time. The Department recognises that it is not simply a matter of solving one aspect of the problem; there must be an integrated and holistic approach, which it is taking.

Health and personal social services have piloted several local projects and schemes to make their community services more responsive. Examples include rapid response nursing, hospital at home, intensive community care and home from hospital schemes that provide intermediate care in the community and prevent inappropriate admissions to hospital. Such step-up and step-down initiatives have developed good practice and demonstrated innovation. The challenge is now to replicate that type of scheme across the North and to provide the necessary funding to ensure that they are successful. That is something that the Department will attempt to do while working within the overall budget.

Health and social services boards and trusts have operational responsibility for the assessment of the need for nursing home and residential care in their areas, and they constantly review the beds available against that assessment.

In some areas there are difficulties with the provision of residential beds in the independent sector. However, I am advised that regionally there does not appear to be a shortfall in the numbers needed. There are three different types of providers of residential care beds: the statutory sector accounts for 36%; the private sector accounts for 43%; and the voluntary sector accounts for 20%. Approximately 95% of nursing home beds are provided by the private sector. The remainder is provided by the voluntary sector.

Several Members mentioned the difficulties faced by people who are involved in running nursing homes in the independent sector. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety examined the fees structure in the independent sector and reported in May 2000. As a result of that report, over the last two years fees were increased by more than the social security uplifts. I fully recognise the contribution that the independent sector makes, and if Mr Cedric Wilson were still present, I would assure him of that. I will continue to explore ways of providing further increases within the available resources.

Several Members asked what the additional 1,000 community care packages would mean. They will prevent inappropriate admissions and speed up the discharge of improving patients. However, they will also provide for the needs of those in the community whom the trusts are trying to help at present. I assure Members that trusts will look at local and individual circumstances in their areas.

When considering the parity of such funding, it is unfortunate if Members quote the funding that is available to bodies such as the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust without making it clear that funding for community and hospital services in that trust area also includes the funding for Muckamore Abbey Hospital. However, there are differences

in community care from trust to trust, depending on the specific needs that the boards and trusts must assess.

The cost of keeping people in hospital rather than in the community is a given. The Department knows that, clearly, that must be addressed. However, it is equally clear that the only way in which it could instantly make a massive change — by putting all funding into the community sector — would stop people from receiving treatment in hospital because, in the interim, the hospital's overheads remain.

Therefore we need a service with the flexibility to make the moves that are needed. During the 1980s and the 1990s, £190 million — in today's terms — was taken out of both hospital and community sectors. That robbed the service of that flexibility. This measure will save money in the future. We have been working to provide 230 extra packages this year and 1,000 extra packages next year. We will continue to make as much as we can of the available resources in a holistic manner. We hope to be able to make progress in this area.

The money that I have received since I came into office was also mentioned. Five sixths of that money is spent on the rising costs of existing services. People need to look at the extra money in that context. The rest of the money is all that can be used to build up services.

I am keen to ensure that the standard of care and provision is maintained and improved. Not only have we taken immediate action, but the consultation document 'Best Practice — Best Care' sets out proposals for a framework for setting standards; securing local accountability for the quality of services delivered; and improving monitoring and regulation.

Many people who receive community care services to manage their lives depend on the care and support of a carer. It is estimated that there are 250,000 carers here and that there is a carer in 18% of households. Carers enable many thousands of vulnerable people who need support to continue to lead independent lives in the community. At the same time, carers reduce the amount of input that social services and other agencies need to make. It is essential that we act positively to protect the interests of carers and foster a climate in which they can continue to care for as long as they wish and are able to.

It is important to state that many carers carry out their roles because they wish to do so. However, we must foster a climate in which they can continue to care for as long as they wish and are able to do so without jeopardising their own health or financial security and without reducing their expectations of a reasonable quality of life. Therefore, in recognition of the role of carers in delivering health and personal social services, I commissioned a strategy for carers in October 2000. Officials have now developed proposals and recommendations, working with, and in close

consultation with, the major carers' organisations and carers themselves, including those mentioned by Members in the debate.

I recently received the report with recommendations for services that will support carers in the valuable work that they do. I join with other Members in commending those who carry out that tremendous caring role. I have made it clear that I want a strategy that will contain practical measures that will make a real difference to carers here. I am determined to make a reality of the strategy. One measure that I have already indicated to the Assembly is my intention to allocate funding breaks for carers in 2002 and 2003.

Members will also be aware that I recently introduced a Bill to the Assembly to give health and social services boards and trusts the power to provide services to carers to improve their health and well-being. We must give the boards and trusts the power to do this. I will also continue to argue for the extra resources that are needed and ensure the provision of those resources when I can.

It would not have been right or proper to introduce a Bill without providing carers with the right to an assessment. The right to an assessment does not alter the trusts' existing legal responsibilities. As with all services for which people are assessed — whether those are in coronary care, care in a hospital or care in a community setting — we want to be able to provide the services and have the resources to do so at the right level.

2.00 pm

Health and social services were given priority in the Executive's revised Budget for 2002-03, which has enabled the Department to prepare to tackle some of the current serious problems in the community and hospital sectors. There was a proposal to inject additional funding into community care next year, and £4.5 million has been allocated for the introduction of free nursing care from October 2002.

Subject to the necessary legislation being passed through the Assembly, measures to facilitate free nursing care will be carried in the health and personal social services (No 1) Bill, which will be introduced in the Assembly in the coming weeks. I have asked the chief nursing officer to set up a group to examine how the need for nursing care can be assessed professionally and in a manner that can be understood clearly by the public and with a minimum of additional bureaucracy. That group will report to me with recommendations in sufficient time to allow the necessary consultation and to introduce the required legislation to implement the agreed recommendations by October 2002.

The proposals that I have outlined will pave the way for free nursing care in all settings and will relieve some of the financial worries of those cared for in nursing homes. Further improvements have been made to the

charging system for care, and the ending of the income support preserved rights scheme will bring around 1,700 existing cases fully into care management, allowing those people's needs to be assessed for the first time and met in the most appropriate manner. The ending of the residential allowance and the transfer of the related funding will allow trusts more flexibility in considering care at home rather than in residential settings. I have provided funding for an additional 230 care packages this year and a further 1,000 care packages next year. All those proposals are already underpinned by appropriate funding in 2002-03. As additional funding becomes available, I will introduce other measures that are part and parcel of clear plans that I have for the way forward for the service.

A member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety stated that Scotland would provide free nursing and personal care from April 2002. That statement is incorrect. Scotland's latest plans are that that care will be delivered from July 2002, and we shall see how that progresses. It is unfortunate that we have not been able to move as quickly on that issue as others have elsewhere, but we have had to work with the funding that is available to us. I am delighted that we now have the funding to provide free care.

The Executive are currently conducting their own review of the future of public administration structures here. I reiterate that it makes sense to take any review of health service structures forward in the context of the Executive's stated intention to bring that forward and to examine the outcome of the initial consultation on the acute hospitals review, which also mentions structure. The Executive must decide whether some of those issues are taken forward separately or simultaneously with aspects of the public administration review.

However, I must make two important points. First, administrative and clerical staff carry out a range of duties related directly to patient care, and the provision of support to professional staff means that more professional time can be devoted to patient care. Therefore, administrative and clerical staff clearly play a key role in healthcare provision.

Secondly, no amount of restructuring will provide £190 million, which is today's equivalent of the amount that was taken out of the health and social services budget in the 1980s and 1990s.

The setting up of the Assembly provided a new beginning. When I came into office, many issues needed to be addressed; Members were aware of that. We can now make progress together on many of those issues: on the one hand, we can take immediate action to deal with immediate problems, while on the other we can draw together the strands of different examinations, initiatives and some initiative reviews to create an overall regional strategy, as I reported to the Assembly

and the public. I would welcome the opportunity to engage Members further in this debate.

Mr Gallagher: I acknowledge the fact that the Minister was present at the debate for more than two hours, which is a considerable demand on ministerial time. The issue is not the responsibility of one Department only; it involves serious cross-departmental matters, such as transport, housing, culture and leisure, and employment and learning. In addition to housing, Mr McHugh mentioned cross-border issues, which form an important part of improvements to care in the community for those who live adjacent to the border.

All Members' contributions were well made and highlighted the key points involved. Mr Berry was the first to draw attention to bed blocking. He referred not only to the problem of patients' having to wait on trolleys in corridors, but to the importance of having places and funding for nursing home beds, which are known as "step-down beds". If trusts had the available resources, they could move people from hospitals to those beds, thus helping to avoid the serious pressures of recent weeks and previous winters.

Respite care, which was mentioned by Mr McCarthy and Ms McWilliams, gives carers a break and eases the demands on them by enabling the person that they are caring for 24 hours a day to stay at a facility for a few days. Carers favour such facilities, but at present our provision is sketchy. Many of the available respite facilities are located far from carers' and patients' homes, and that can result in stress for a patient who is moved there. There is considerable dissatisfaction with our respite care provision at present.

Mrs Courtney and Ms McWilliams mentioned primary care. It is an area that I hope will receive more concentrated attention in the coming months and years.

Paul Berry, Alan McFarland and Annie Courtney referred to the closure of nursing homes, and the Minister made it clear that more than £4 million will be available for the provision of nursing care from October 2002. The waiting lists, and their implications that seem to clog up the system, were outlined by Cedric Wilson, among others. Rev William McCrea's perspective on people who depend on community care was well articulated, and he reminded us how unsatisfactory it is for people to experience shortcomings. It was useful to be reminded how the users of the service feel about it.

One inescapable problem, which was highlighted by John Kelly, was the increasing number of elderly people, which is a trend that is set to continue. Rev Robert Coulter, among others, referred to the breakdown in communications and the difficulties arising from that.

In some instances patients are discharged too early from hospital. Many of them have to return to hospital, and that compounds the problem. Jim Shannon pointed

that out. The matter of giving up pensions and benefits was raised by myself and developed by Oliver Gibson. John Kelly said that a strategy is one thing, but the strategy in itself is of no use if we do not have resources to back it up. We cannot argue with that, but at the same time we cannot get hung up on which comes first — the chicken or the egg, the strategy or the money.

In the Health Service we can always take steps to improve the quality of service, and that applies to every other area too. However, we can tackle the unwieldy structures that were referred to and that are a problem in some cases. Many Members gave examples of how we can tackle the inefficiencies and the inconsistencies, as well as the information deficit. I gather, from comments that have been made, that the point has been taken. I hope that we will improve in that regard.

Mr J Kelly: Does the Member agree that you cannot have any eggs if you have no chickens?

Mr Gallagher: Yes, but I do not want to digress. Suffice it to say that there is room for improvement in every organisation, and we hope that it will be ongoing. There are particular points to which we want priority to be given. The Minister made helpful comments with regard to additional money to improve the situation around high-dependency beds. More people in residential nursing homes will qualify for assessment; that is very helpful too. I did not quite pick up the Minister's point about the community care review, but I look forward to reading it in Hansard.

2.15 pm

I thank all Members for their contributions. It is clear that there is a recognition from everyone that we are not dealing with numbers and lists, but with people. There is a sense that we all share this responsibility.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the increasing difficulties facing those who have to rely on community care packages and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take action to remedy this situation.

Ms Ramsey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Several questions came up during the debate that related to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Executive. Will you forward a copy of today's Hansard to them?

Mr Deputy Speaker: If the questions to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have already been put on the Order Paper, I would not be happy about trying to add to those now. Is that what the Member is suggesting?

Ms Ramsey: No. Several questions were raised today directed to the Office of the First Minister and

the Deputy First Minister. Can you ensure that a copy of Hansard is sent to them?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That certainly will be done.

The sitting was suspended at 2.16 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that question 14, in the name of Mr Eddie McGrady, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

Independent International Commission on Decommissioning

1. **Mr Weir** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if it has received a report from the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning; and to make a statement. (AQO 611/01)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): We have not jointly received any reports on decommissioning. However, the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) has reported to the British and Irish Governments six times during last year, and those reports have been published. The latest report, dated 23 October 2001, explained that, following a meeting, the IRA representative proposed a method for putting IRA arms completely and verifiably beyond use. The IICD witnessed an event that it regards as significant, in which the IRA put a quantity of arms completely beyond use. The material in question includes arms, ammunitions and explosives.

Mr Weir: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his reply. The concern of many Members is that we should have a process rather than a one-off gesture. In the light of that, is the Deputy First Minister aware of how many meetings have taken place since 23 October between the IICD and the representatives of the IRA?

The Deputy First Minister: Mr Weir refers to a concern felt by many Members. First, with regard to the number of meetings that have taken place since the report, I refer the Member to my answer that the First Minister and I have not jointly received any reports from the IICD. We would not expect, by way of our offices as First Minister and Deputy First Minister, to receive any reports from the IICD other than those that are made to the Governments and subsequently published.

Unionist Alienation

2. **Mr Gibson** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what measures it would

consider introducing to help address any Unionist alienation in West Tyrone. (AQO 603/01)

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): The Belfast Agreement directly addresses the problem of alienation in Northern Ireland wherever it occurs. All parties to the agreement have recognised the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and to be accepted as Irish, British or both. The agreement also guaranteed that Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom shall not be changed, save with the consent of a majority of its people. It also affirmed the parties' commitment to mutual respect, civil rights, religious liberties and equality of opportunity for everyone in the community. The Programme for Government makes clear our commitment to the practical implementation of those guarantees, in particular through our policies for community relations, equality and tackling social need.

Mr Gibson: Is the Minister aware that when one speaks to people from the Unionist community on the streets of Omagh and in the villages of West Tyrone one realises that they feel as though they have been demonised — they feel very alienated? There are 90 unsolved murders in West Tyrone that are never mentioned except by local representatives. This weekend the community felt that the Teebane massacre, in which eight workers were killed on their way home from working in my town, barely got a mention, except by their relatives. Also, in Enniskillen residents of my constituency of West Tyrone were murdered, and there have been multiple murders on the Omagh to Ballygawley road — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. This is an opportunity for the Member to ask a supplementary question to his question — not to make a statement, much less a speech.

Mr Gibson: In view of the fact that the Unionist community of West Tyrone feels totally alienated, what will the Minister do to help to restore some confidence to those people?

The First Minister: I understand the point that the Member makes, and I appreciate people's feelings with regard to, for example, the Teebane massacre and the others that the Member mentioned. When people see the publicity given to other cases there is inevitably an element of reflection. However, the Member will acknowledge that one of this morning's newspapers devoted a double-page spread to the commemoration service that took place at the weekend for the Teebane massacre, so the matters are not forgotten.

As to the question of unsolved murders, it would be helpful if the police would sometimes give us an indication of which cases they have closed the files on. A large number of incidents in Northern Ireland are formally regarded as unsolved. Although the police

have closed the files, they know who were responsible, and they know that those persons are no longer in a position to be made amenable — many of the perpetrators are now themselves dead. It would be interesting to know just how many cases have been cleared up and how many have not. That would give an entirely different perspective on the matter.

Generating confidence within the community as a whole is very much at the forefront of all our actions in the Administration. The primary way in which we hope to give that confidence is by delivering good administration and demonstrating to people in Northern Ireland that everyone can be included in the arrangements if they so wish. We regret that in some cases people feel excluded. However, that is in part due to the poor quality of leadership offered to them.

Mrs Courtney: Does the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister accept that the Good Friday Agreement does not create a cold house for anyone, but rather an equal house for everyone? Do they accept that there is, as Richard Haass has pointed out, a duty on all political leaders to articulate a new inclusive vision for our society? Do the Ministers also accept Mr Haass's view that there has been a failure by political leaders to articulate such a vision?

The First Minister: There is a lot of merit in what the Member says, and I warmly commend the speech by Ambassador Richard Haass that she refers to. The central section of that speech addressed some of the issues that the previous Member addressed and, indeed, put its finger on the problem of the quality of leadership that is being offered in some quarters. In particular, I endorse one sentence from Richard Haass's speech:

"The leaders in Northern Ireland must resist appealing only to the dissatisfied."

Implicit in what he says, and explicit at times, is that they have to have a breadth that covers the community as a whole, and not just concern themselves purely with the interests of one section alone. Modesty might prevent me from referring to the fact that I addressed many of these issues myself in a speech to the British-Irish Association nearly two years ago.

Mr Armstrong: Will the First Minister accept a personal invitation to tour my constituency of Mid Ulster and see for himself the evidence of Republican chill-factor tactics — hordes of tricolours, IRA flags and other offensive Republican slogans, with the aggravating aim of insulting Unionists and the callous intent of putting, and keeping, decent Unionist people in a cold house?

The First Minister: The Member makes reference to the prevalence of paramilitary flags and slogans in a number of areas. That is a problem in other constituencies, as well as Mid Ulster. The display of

paramilitary flags and slogans creates more than a chill factor; it contains an implicit threat, and that is to be deprecated wherever it occurs. Those who represent or are linked with some of the paramilitaries responsible for this behaviour have a duty to try to ensure that nothing is done by those organisations that in any way inhibits the human rights of the people of Northern Ireland.

Obstacles to Mobility Study

3. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the Obstacles to Mobility Study commissioned by the North/South Ministerial Council. (AQO 623/01)

The Deputy First Minister: As the joint communiqué from the third plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in September confirmed, and as I said last week, it is intended to publish the consultants' report on obstacles to cross-border mobility on the island of Ireland by the end of this month. The study comprises a wide range of research methods, including surveys of members of the public, a programme of case studies and interviews with representative bodies. Towards the end of the assignment, two public consultation conferences were held in Omagh and Carrickmacross. At these conferences the views of interested parties, including consumers, were identified and explored. The report makes a number of recommendations for information improvements, social security and pensions, education, training and employment, telecommunications, banking and insurance.

In view of the scope of the study the devolved Administration and the Irish Government have agreed that, upon publication and prior to offering views, a consultation exercise will be undertaken. That process will enable interested organisations, including Government Departments and individuals, to give their views on the recommendations and their implementation. We have no doubt that the appropriate Departments and bodies which have an interest in the range of issues covered by the report will want to study it in detail before presenting their views during the consultation process.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the Deputy Minister's clear assurances. How will the study be carried forward, and how can the ordinary person in the street participate in the consultative stage?

The Deputy First Minister: The steering group responsible for taking forward the decisions agreed at the North/South Ministerial Council plenary meeting on 30 November 2001 met last week to discuss the next steps. I can confirm that, as part of the publication process, the report will first be made available to Assembly Members and then mailed to key organisations, including Government Departments and agencies. Advertisements will be placed in key newspapers announcing publication

and inviting interested individuals and organisations to respond. A press release will accompany the publication. This range of measures will allow citizens to respond to the report by the closing date of early March 2002.

Mr McClarty: Can the Deputy First Minister give assurances that any actions resulting from the Obstacles to Mobility Study will concentrate on addressing genuine obstacles and not those designed to give frontier workers an advantage over non-frontier workers?

The Deputy First Minister: The report is now going out for consultation, and the North/South Ministerial Council, in considering and agreeing the report's publication back in September 2001, did not take an opinion on any of the proposals. It would be wrong to do that prior to implementation. However, the Council did agree that the working intent and thrust of the report is to ensure that any disadvantages created by existing obstacles are removed and that new obstacles are not created. Neither does it want there to be any unequal treatment. The Council also wishes to make sure that any improvement in the North/South situation is part of enhanced mobility on an east-west basis as well.

Mr Speaker: Before moving to the next question, I must advise the House that question 7 in the name of Mr Cobain has been withdrawn.

Meetings with the Prime Minister/Taoiseach

4. **Mr Bradley** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what plans it has to meet the Prime Minister and/or the Taoiseach. (AQO 643/01)

The First Minister: The Deputy First Minister and I met the Prime Minister on 13 December 2001, and we also met the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach at the recent meeting of the British-Irish Council. The next scheduled joint meeting with the Prime Minister and/or the Taoiseach this year is within our commitment to that Council. There are currently no other joint meetings with the Prime Minister or the Taoiseach in our diaries. However, as in December, issues may arise where it is in the interest of Northern Ireland that a joint meeting be held, and that can be done at short notice.

Mr Bradley: Does the First Minister accept the need for a charter of rights, as envisaged by the Good Friday Agreement, to be signed by all political parties on the island, reflecting agreed measures for the protection of fundamental rights for everyone living in Ireland?

Mr Speaker: Of course, I will not obstruct the First Minister if he wishes to respond, but the Member's supplementary question is thoroughly tangential to the question, particularly in view of the fact that it refers to North/South arrangements more than to meetings with the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach.

The First Minister: I thank you, Mr Speaker, for offering that degree of protection although I appreciate that that question could have arisen in a discussion with the Taoiseach at a previous meeting and that it might arise in a future one.

By coincidence, I have the relevant paragraph of the Belfast Agreement to hand.

Mr Speaker: That is remarkably prescient of you, First Minister.

2.45 pm

The First Minister: The relevant paragraph of the agreement envisages a joint committee of representatives of the two Human Rights Commissions, North and South, as a forum for the consideration of human rights issues. It suggests that the joint committee would consider the possibility of a charter, which would be open to signature by all democratic political parties.

As Members know, I have reservations about many of the individuals who make up the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, although I concede that there has been some improvement in that respect recently.

The Human Rights Commission in the Republic of Ireland has not progressed as far as ours has done. The Irish Government have put their commission on a statutory footing only in recent months, so it is still early days in that regard. It is a matter for the committee to consider whether the charter that is envisaged in that part of the agreement should come into existence.

Having said that, I understand the point behind the Member's question. If there were such a charter, it would be nice to see which parties were prepared to sign it and stand over its provisions. That might be a revealing exercise.

Dr Birnie: On the subject of ministerial summits, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have had some opportunities to meet with their counterparts in the Welsh and Scottish Administrations through the British-Irish Council. Does the First Minister agree that it would be beneficial for himself and the Deputy First Minister to make early arrangements to visit Edinburgh and Cardiff for in-depth discussions, which could include the working of the British-Irish Council?

The First Minister: I agree with the Member's point. At the recent British-Irish Council plenary meeting in Dublin, we met with the Scottish and Welsh First Ministers. I mentioned to them the possibility of a formal visit to the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament by the Deputy First Minister and me. That would be a valuable exercise, not only in the context of the British-Irish Council, but to enable us to share our experiences of how the Administrations work. There are coalitions in Cardiff and Edinburgh, and we are all learning how to frame the Administrations

and our procedures. It would be valuable to exchange experiences and consult on other matters. Officials are considering the matter and are in contact with the other Administrations. We hope that such visits can take place soon.

Mr S Wilson: I assure the House that neither the First Minister nor the Deputy First Minister wrote my supplementary question.

When he meets with the Prime Minister, will the First Minister tell him about the magnificent negotiating skills of the leader of the Alliance Party, who turned political somersaults to save the First Minister's skin and then found that the promises that had been made to him were not kept during the review process? Is the First Minister embarrassed that the oft-used tactic of making promises to secure votes and breaking them later has been used not only on the Alliance Party's electorate, but on the Ulster Unionists' also?

The First Minister: I am glad that the Member made it clear that I had no hand in framing his question, because I would be deeply embarrassed to have had produced such rubbish — if he doesn't mind me saying so.

The allegations made about the Alliance Party are off the mark. A review, which will explore the relevant issues, continues. Personally, I have great sympathy with the Alliance Party's concerns about the way in which the procedures operate. However, those are substantial matters, which must be considered carefully, and that is being done. I am sure that the Alliance Party understands and agrees with the way in which we are proceeding.

Mr S Wilson: Perhaps, in a supplementary question, the leader would like to explain that.

Social Inclusion

5. **Mr O'Connor** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what plans it has to promote social inclusion in the year 2002.

(AQO 637/01)

The Deputy First Minister: In line with the commitment the Executive made in the Programme for Government, we have consulted widely on future cross-departmental issues to be tackled under the promoting social inclusion element of New TSN. As a result of that consultation, the new Programme for Government announces two new priority areas — disability and older people. Work will start on those new priorities this year. Other issues arising from that consultation are still under consideration, and the Executive expect to make an announcement on those soon. Work will also continue on existing social

inclusion priorities on travellers, ethnic minorities, better services and teenage pregnancy.

Mr O'Connor: Can the Deputy First Minister provide further information on how the promotion of social inclusion will work and how it will be taken forward? Can he assure the House that there will be a focus on the implementation of the Executive's response to the disability rights task force?

The Deputy First Minister: During the year the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will establish an interdepartmental working group that will take forward work on promoting the social inclusion priority of disability. That will include input from the voluntary sector as is deemed necessary. The working group will focus on a strategy to implement the Executive's response to the task force's recommendations and any wider issues that are raised in the consultation. The working group will also monitor progress on the Executive's response to the task force's recommendations.

Dr Adamson: Will the Deputy First Minister assure the House that pockets of extreme deprivation found in otherwise affluent areas, which were previously overlooked and disadvantaged due to the inadequacies of the Robson indicators, will now be identified positively and treated as priority areas? I am thinking of east Belfast in particular.

The Deputy First Minister: The Member refers to some of the shortcomings in relation to the use and application of the Robson indicators. One exercise that has been undertaken on behalf of the Executive, in which I was involved as Minister of Finance and Personnel, was to bring forward new indicators. We now have the Noble indicators. It is hoped that they will, in a more articulate way, express and target deprivation in particular localities, not just at ward level but at sub-ward level too. Through the Executive's New TSN policy, we are committed to dealing with different needs in different areas. It falls to the Departments to decide how they target their programmes and which Noble indicators apply best to different programmes and localities.

Review of Public Administration

6. **Mr M Robinson** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if the proposed review of public administration will entail a full analysis of the number of quangos and public appointments that currently exist in Northern Ireland. (AQO 624/01)

The First Minister: The review of public administration, which is to be launched in the spring, will entail a full analysis of all aspects of public administration in Northern Ireland to ensure proper accountability for all services and an effective and efficient administration structure. The Office of the First Minister and the

Deputy First Minister is also considering a separate review of the public appointments system, which will consider the most appropriate arrangements for making appointments to public bodies. The separate review may need to take into account issues raised by the review of public administration.

Mr M Robinson: The First Minister will be aware of the unrepresentative nature of quangos in the past. He mentioned in his initial response that he would be paying due regard to making the bodies fair and accountable. How will he ensure that they are seen to be so?

The First Minister: The review of public appointments will determine whether the current arrangements are suitable for use by the devolved Administration. The review will address several issues, including ways of ensuring that applications to public bodies are as representative as possible.

Several other issues must be considered, including that of the central appointments unit, which, with responsibility for public appointments, encourages best practice across Departments.

If we ensure that a wide range of persons applies for public appointments, such appointments are guaranteed to be as well balanced as the Member wants. In that respect, we wish to encourage people to apply. Procedures are in place that must be followed, and appointments are now very rarely made purely on ministerial discretion. However, that is the first issue that must be addressed.

Rev Robert Coulter: Does the First Minister agree that it is of immense concern that 19 different health trusts and four different health bodies are flourishing? They contribute to extraordinary bureaucratic wastage in the poorly performing Health Service. Will the eagerly awaited review of public administration deal with that outrageous situation properly? Will the review of quangos be addressed separately in order to expedite the necessary changes?

The First Minister: The reason it is called a review of public administration is precisely because the review will not only be of local government but will take into account all arrangements for the local delivery of services. That means looking at the structure of health trusts and, indeed, boards in Northern Ireland generally.

They have already been considered to a degree. The recent Burns and Hayes reviews highlighted organisational issues that are relevant to the review of public administration. Although those reviews are under consultation and the Executive have not yet taken a view, it will be necessary to ensure that the specific organisational recommendations in them are addressed and taken into account by the team responsible for the review of public administration. That again underlines

the need for that review to move with all due deliberation so that we can properly integrate our consideration of those matters.

Holy Cross / Glenbryn Initiative

8. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the follow up to its welcome initiative on Holy Cross/Glenbryn. (AQO 645/01)

The First Minister: Our senior liaison officer in Ardoyne continues to facilitate and support efforts to establish a joint community forum. We have announced our willingness to support requests for assistance with facilitation or mediation. We are determined to implement, as quickly as possible, the measures that we announced on 23 November. Work on road ramps on the Ardoyne Road continues, and the necessary statutory procedures to introduce a traffic-calming scheme are under way.

We have commissioned the preparation of a detailed design for the regeneration and improvement of the Alliance Avenue intersection and related community safety measures that fall to this Administration. Those include a possible road realignment at the intersection. That work will be progressed urgently in consultation with local communities and other interested parties.

An engineering design of the proposed realignment of the Ardoyne Road has been received from the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service. Design options for the environmental treatment of the interface should be complete in the next few days. Those designs will enable detailed local consultation with both sides of the community to take place urgently.

In December, we visited north Belfast with the Minister for Social Development to unveil the North Belfast Community Action Project, which aims to put in place a series of short-, medium- and long-term actions to address social and community issues in north Belfast. In particular, it will focus on building community capacity in those areas where it is weak and on maintaining community activity where it is working well.

An outreach advisory service is being provided to help to ensure that all areas can take full advantage of existing programmes, including Peace II. The project's aim is to help the people of north Belfast to address their needs by engaging more effectively with the devolved Administration and the statutory agencies. It is also about enabling them to work with other communities in a positive and co-ordinated manner.

Although we hope that the project will facilitate early action, we recognise that there is no quick fix for the problems in north Belfast. We are fully committed to the medium- and long-term work that will be necessary to address divisions there. I am sure that the

Member knows that we are also committed to a range of educational and health issues.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the First Minister for that detailed answer. I congratulate the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for their continued interest in and perseverance with what is a very difficult problem in north Belfast. Are there any practical plans to help people living at the interface with protection for windows?

3.00 pm

The First Minister: I am familiar with the problem at the interface on Alliance Avenue in the area represented by the Member. Properties have been subject to attack from a variety of missiles, and there are problems in protecting windows. A scheme already exists to protect the homes of Housing Executive and housing association tenants. Measures have been taken to deal with several Housing Executive homes. However, five properties are privately owned, and there have been difficulties in finding a scheme to address that problem. Officials in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have been working closely with colleagues in the Department for Social Development and the Department of Finance and Personnel to develop a scheme to address those cases.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that question 3 in the name of Mr Eddie McGrady MP has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

Rate Relief

1. **Mr Carrick** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has consulted with the Minister of Finance and Personnel about rate relief for outdoor sporting pitches and changing accommodation.

(AQO 614/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I have not consulted with the Minister of Finance and Personnel regarding rate relief for outdoor sporting pitches and changing accommodation, because I understand that under current rating legislation substantial rate relief is already available for sport and recreation. While additional relief might seem highly desirable, I recognise that any increase in the current level of relief would inevitably have implications for those who pay full rates. The sports sector therefore needs to look beyond rate relief for other ways to ease the financial burden, such as those that Her Majesty's Treasury's recently published consultation document, 'Promoting Sport in the Community,' asks community amateur sports clubs to consider.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Mc Clelland] in the Chair)

Mr Carrick: Does the Minister agree, however, that given the lack of financial resources at club level and the current poor revenue cash flow such rate relief would be a welcome reduction in the establishment overhead and a significant boost to clubs that are fighting for survival in the continual battle to improve facilities and participation at player and spectator levels?

Mr McGimpsey: I recognise that sport is under-funded, and that point has been made on several occasions in the House. I would prefer to see the Assembly vote grant-in-aid funds to my Department to allow me to increase further the potential of the Sports Council to assist directly in the promotion of sport.

It is also important to examine the current situation with regard to rates. District council swimming pools and leisure centres, playing pitches and changing rooms are exempt from rates. Amateur sports clubs — that is, those which are non-profit-making and do not employ professional staff or players — have a 65% reduction available to them. Last autumn the Chancellor brought forward an Inland Revenue tax incentive scheme to help community amateur sports clubs. Around the same time the Charities Commission made a statement that charitable status could be a possible way forward. I refer to ‘Promoting Sport in the Community’ as mentioned in my previous answer. The Chancellor now asks sports clubs to determine which way they want to go, whether by the Charities Commission’s statement on possible charitable status or by his Inland Revenue tax incentive scheme. Responses are due by 1 February 2002, and I encourage all clubs to respond. That will determine a way forward with regard to rates.

Linguistic Diversity Department

2. **Dr Adamson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (a) the expertise of staff in the Linguistic Diversity Department in Ulster Scots; and (b) the number of meetings branch officers have had since 1 January 2001 with (i) Irish language groups and (ii) Ulster- Scots language groups. (AQO 606/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The officials in the Linguistic Diversity Branch of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure belong to the Northern Ireland Civil Service’s general administrative grades and were recruited in accordance with Northern Ireland Civil Service competencies and procedures. Expert advice is sourced as appropriate. They take appropriate opportunities to develop contact with people who have an interest in the Irish language and in Ulster-Scots language and culture.

In 2001, officials attended 18 meetings or events with an Irish language or Ulster-Scots language and cultural dimension. Since January 2001, officials with

responsibility for linguistic diversity have held four meetings with groups with an Irish language dimension and five meetings with groups with an Ulster-Scots language or cultural dimension. They also have regular meetings with Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch and Foras na Gaeilge.

Dr Adamson: I thank the Minister for his response. Can he assure the House that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will maintain parity of esteem between the Irish language and Ulster-Scots?

Mr McGimpsey: I readily give that assurance to Dr Adamson. I refer to the statement that I made last week about Foras na Gaeilge and Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch. I said that both Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch and Foras na Gaeilge are functioning well, and we want that to continue. Equity and fair treatment are the benchmark for how the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure treats the Irish language and Ulster-Scots.

Arts Festivals

4. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) the number of arts festivals that currently operate in Northern Ireland; and (b) the measures taken to make them inclusive for all communities. (AQO 617/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Numerous arts festivals in Northern Ireland are sponsored by a variety of bodies, including district councils and community and arts organisations. Although I am unable to give an exhaustive list of all arts festivals, I can say that under the cultural diversity grant application scheme run by the Department, several festivals, with a strong arts component, have received financial support. The Northern Ireland Events Company funded four arts festivals, and during the millennium celebrations, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure funded 84 festivals and projects.

All applications for cultural diversity funding must adhere to the criteria outlined by the cultural diversity assessment panel. The projects must have strong cultural diversity elements to encourage participation from all sections of the community. They are aimed at increasing people’s understanding of, and education in, a variety of issues.

The Arts Council funded 42 festivals in the 2001-02 financial year. The Arts Council and its clients are committed to the promotion of equal opportunities and the targeting of social need in all their programmes, including arts festivals.

The standard conditions for grants state that the Arts Council must inspect the client’s equal opportunities policies and stipulate that all events must be open and inclusive.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. However, when allocating finances to local arts festivals, will he consider giving proportionate amounts to different communities, unless it can be shown that the festival is truly cross-community?

Mr McGimpsey: To give the Member a better understanding, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure does not directly fund any arts festivals. It allocates funding through an intermediate body — the Arts Council. As I said earlier, it supported 42 festivals in the previous financial year, at a total cost of £530,000. That amount was made up of £273,000 of grant and aid funds, for which the House voted, and £257,000 of lottery funding.

The Northern Ireland Events Company, which is the direct responsibility of the Department, has also supported approximately four festivals. Most festivals are not directly supported by those organisations; district councils play an important role. Ken Robinson said that such events should be inclusive of all communities. We all strongly support that notion. Where it exists, division reflects our society. Those fundamental ills cannot necessarily be cured by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Events Company, or any district council. Our aim is to address the issues and to tackle them through our policies on equality, promoting cultural diversity and targeting social need (TSN). In tackling those problems, the proper way forward is to eliminate the chill factors, or perceived chill factors.

National Stadium

5. **Mr M Robinson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the likely cost implications and timescale for the national stadium. (AQO 629/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The cost implications of providing a national stadium would be considerable. A pre-feasibility study carried out in 1999 indicated that some £60 million would be required for a 35,000-seater stadium. The cost of the site, site works, car parking and so on would be additional. The study also indicated that the annual running cost would be some £2 million. The advisory panel's report on creating a soccer strategy for Northern Ireland is out for consultation until 31 January 2002. The report recommended the establishment of a national stadium, which would provide a neutral and welcoming environment and meet international standards for football. That recommendation will be given further consideration in the light of the responses received during the consultation period. The needs of other key sports, and proposals for meeting those needs, will also have a bearing on the issue.

Mr M Robinson: I thank the Minister for his response. Given the likely cost implications which the Minister referred to, and the impractical physical task of creating a stadium which is multi-purpose, does the Minister not

agree that it would be more feasible to upgrade the existing stadium at Windsor than to construct a new one?

Mr McGimpsey: One option is to upgrade Windsor Park. However, that is merely an option. We do not have a strategy for soccer at the moment. We have a strategy for Gaelic football, which is being finalised. The strategy for rugby is also being finalised — that is no secret, because representatives of the sport made it clear that a 15,000-seater stadium is required. Gaelic football officials are examining their requirements. We must deal with the matter holistically, and we must consider the needs of more than one sport. In addition, the costs are steep. We have yet to make a final decision; we are still considering the possibilities.

The upgrading of Windsor Park would certainly be an option, if we decided to provide a soccer-only stadium. That would presuppose that Gaelic football officials were content to go ahead with the facility at Casement Park, or that rugby representatives were content to provide their own facility at Ravenhill Road. All of the options have cost implications. It is not enough to say that Windsor Park is cheaper — the cost implication of that option for other sports must also go into the mix. The size of the pitch, the number of spectators, the locations, the possibility of sharing and the costs must all be considered in the light of the various sports' strategies.

Mr Weir: I welcome the fact that the Minister seems to be giving broad consideration to every option. In the light of that, has the Minister met, or does he intend to meet, Government representatives from the Republic of Ireland, given the fiasco surrounding proposals for their national stadium, which is popularly known as "Bertie's bowl"?

Mr McGimpsey: I have not met representatives from the Irish Republic. Their experience in respect of proposals for a stadium in Dublin is not relevant to us. We have our own problems to tackle; we can see a way forward, and we aim to follow that. We do not need to look South of the border for experience on the matter. Organisers of the various sports — soccer, rugby, Gaelic, athletics, and so on — have enough expertise to allow us to go forward in partnership.

3.15 pm

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister accept that the word "nation", when applied to the Six Counties, is offensive to Nationalists and that nationally-minded Irish citizens look to the Abbotstown project, if any, for the provision of a national stadium? Does he also acknowledge that pursuance of his pet project would be a waste of resources?

Mr McGimpsey: I am confused by Mr McElduff's remarks about my pet project and causing offence.

This issue is about the possible provision of a major sports facility that, if it is built on a joint campus, will benefit all sports. If sports' societies want to go their separate ways, then we must see how we can support each of those sporting groups. Equity and fair treatment are the benchmark and hallmark of my Department. I am therefore confused by Mr McElduff's remarks — I have not heard such remarks from anyone else.

Mr Kennedy: Can the Minister give his view on the real problem — which the previous contributor did not mention — namely that the current GAA rules prevent GAA players from sharing pitches with other codes?

Mr McGimpsey: I have had discussions with the GAA about sharing grounds. Rule 21, another GAA rule that appeared to be immutable, was abolished. I congratulate and thank the GAA for that. It is a major step towards creating an inclusive society in Northern Ireland, and it shows that there are those within the GAA who have a responsible and forward-looking attitude. That is the type of attitude that we will look for, and find, when examining rules and obstacles.

Tourism in West Tyrone

6. **Mr Gibson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what specific measures he proposes to revitalise the tourist industry in West Tyrone.

(AQO 605/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Member will appreciate that tourism is primarily the responsibility of my Colleague, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, my Department has an important role to play in ensuring that the product on offer assists in the drive for a vibrant tourist industry.

In West Tyrone, my Department is responsible for the Ulster American Folk Park in Omagh, which is an international tourism facility that attracts 112,000 visitors per annum. The Northern Ireland Events Company has informed me of the international carriage-driving trials that will take place in the Baronscourt Estate at Newtownstewart in July and of the country music festival that will be held at the Ulster American Folk Park in Omagh in 2003 or 2004. Both events have the potential to increase substantially the number of tourists to the West Tyrone area.

Furthermore, my Department is working with the local councils to ensure that there is a strong cultural dimension to their integrated local strategies in the context of the Peace II programme. Finally, my Department will also administer the distribution of approximately £5 million from the European Union's Programme for Peace and Reconciliation for a water-based tourism measure that will provide further opportunities in the area for angling development and water recreation.

Mr Gibson: I thank the Minister for recognising that the Ulster American Folk Park is the third largest attraction in Northern Ireland. Hotels and bed-and-breakfast accommodation have experienced a serious downturn in trade this year, and it is those private sector businesses which have suffered the most. Can the Minister and his Colleague, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, suggest how the hotels and bed-and-breakfast accommodation can overcome their current financial difficulties?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think there was a question there, Minister.

Mr McGimpsey: I accept the sentiments behind Mr Gibson's remarks, particularly with regard to the hardship being experienced as a result of the past year's difficulties, not least those brought about by foot-and-mouth disease. My Department does not have direct responsibility for hotels — that is a matter for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, I will certainly take on board those remarks and pass them on.

Also, we regard our role in this as working in partnership. It is encouraging that we work with district councils through the cultural forum to provide local cultural strategies that assist in marketing the tourist potential through cultural tourism and that 16 of the 26 local councils have completed their local cultural strategies. Two of those are Omagh and Strabane, which are in the Member's area, and I know that one is of particular interest to him. The goal is an agreed strategy for the development of cultural tourism, which will contribute to a positive image of Northern Ireland at home and abroad. Partnership is the way to take this forward.

Host Town Programme

7. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail progress in Northern Ireland on the Host Town Programme for the 2003 Special Olympics to be held in Dublin. (AQO 650/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The host town programme was launched in Northern Ireland on 30 April 2001. I am delighted at the level of interest shown by towns in Northern Ireland, which has been demonstrated by the fact that 23 submitted applications to become host towns. The outcome of the competition was announced on 19 November 2001, with 22 towns being successful and Larne is being placed on a waiting list. One of the most significant successes is that Belfast will be the host town for a 1,200- to 1,500-strong team from the United States.

Mr Hussey: The Minister bypassed the significance of the awarding of a host town programme to Strabane.

He will be aware that the host town programme will involve substantial financial implications for the councils concerned, particularly those with a smaller rate base. Given the Minister's welcome for the success of this programme, would it not be appropriate for his Department to offer financial support to those councils involved?

Mr McGimpsey: Strabane will be linked with the Cayman Islands. Also, in the west of the Province, Omagh will be linked with Spain. These will be important connections. It is important to stress that this is not just an altruistic exercise for the host towns — there will be major benefits for each of them. The benefits for Belfast, which is the illustration I gave, of a United States team of some 1,200 to 1,500 participants demonstrate the sort of tourist business from which these towns will be able to benefit. This relates to an earlier question from Mr Gibson about the regeneration of tourism. This is another example of how it will be regenerated.

It is believed that the cost per delegate will be in the region of £210 over the course of the stay in the host town. This figure is based on bed-and-breakfast-style accommodation, meals and transport. This cost will be borne entirely by the host town. However, in addition there will be a spend to go with that. It is a matter for the host town to decide whether it will be the beneficiary. My Department does not have the budget to offer the type of grant aid the Member is suggesting, but I do not think it is necessary. The benefits to each town will be such that they will be able to recoup their investment and then some.

Support for Football Clubs

8. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give an updated report on support for football clubs for both the premier and first division of the Irish League. (AQO 652/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Under the safe sports grounds scheme, which I announced in August 2000, funding amounting to just over £2.5 million has been allocated to clubs in the premier and first divisions of the Irish League to carry out a range of health and safety improvements, to assist clubs to develop family spectator facilities and family-based activities, to operate coaching programmes and to develop club management.

Mr Shannon: I am glad to hear that this amount of money has been made available to the premier and first division teams. Can the Minister tell us how much will be available in the next tranche and indicate a timescale for the assistance? As he will be aware, most of the clubs need help now rather than four years or five years down the line. Can he also indicate whether the available finance will be within the proposed

soccer strategy presently being looked at by the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure?

Mr McGimpsey: The funding that I referred to has been under the major works — urgent health and safety works — and safety management programmes for sports grounds. To date, some £2.5 million has gone to soccer clubs, Gaelic clubs and rugby clubs. A further £1 million has been made available for 2002-03, which will allow the scheme to continue. Taking the allocation that we are getting from the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, topped up with some money from the Football Foundation, it means that we will have £1.5 million to continue the scheme next year. That is an important benefit, not only to soccer, but also to rugby and Gaelic sports.

I recently announced that £1.6 million has been made available as an outworking of the soccer strategy. That funding is over three years, and it is specifically for youth development, involving schools of excellence and the possibility of a football academy.

Ulster Orchestra

9. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his plans for ensuring that all schoolchildren have an opportunity to participate in workshops and performances given by the Ulster Orchestra. (AQO 646/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Arts Council of Northern Ireland is providing the Ulster Orchestra with revenue funding of £1.25 million in the 2001-02 financial year to carry out several programmes, one of which is in the field of education. For many years the orchestra has, through its outreach programme, offered various activities and programmes of work for the benefit of children. Those have been developed in conjunction with the education and library boards and the district councils. Schoolchildren are given opportunities to participate in special events such as adopt-a-player schemes, curriculum-based creative projects, special concerts, outreach work, local community music groups and residencies by smaller ensembles from the orchestra.

It is impossible to assure the Member that every schoolchild will have the opportunity to participate in workshops and performances given by the Ulster Orchestra. However, I am confident that everything possible, within the limitations of available resources, is being done to encourage and support closer associations between young people and the Ulster Orchestra.

Mr Dallat: I take the opportunity to express my appreciation to the Ulster Orchestra for the efforts that it has made to reach out to the wider community, and to young people in particular. I am a little disappointed that the Minister cannot guarantee that all schools,

particularly those in rural or disadvantaged areas, will have the opportunity to experience the educational value as well as the entertainment value that the orchestra provides. I ask the Minister to give some thought to how all children can be treated equally in that respect.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am not sure that there was a question there, but the Minister may wish to respond.

Mr McGimpsey: When the Member referred to all schoolchildren, I assumed that he meant schoolchildren in Northern Ireland only. There are approximately 350,000 schoolchildren in the system, so it would be unreasonable to expect us to reach 100% of them.

The Ulster Orchestra recognises that children are its audiences of the future, and it also recognises the strong educational benefits that getting involved with schoolchildren can bring. Consequently, it has set up an educational department to develop opportunities for schoolchildren to participate in workshops and performances. Education plays an increasingly important role in the orchestra's work. It is also part of my Department's corporate strategy. I am sure that the Member is aware that one of our targets in the Programme for Government is to increase participation through enhancing children's and young people's access to creative expression. The Ulster Orchestra's efforts are a perfect example of that, and we are serious about ensuring that the orchestra reaches large numbers of people. We encourage that, but there are limitations to the resources that the Ulster Orchestra has available, and, as the Member will be aware, there are also limitations to the Department's resources.

Staffing – Waterways Ireland

10. **Mr J Wilson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to assess Waterways Ireland's need to recruit additional staff; and to make a statement.

(AQO 600/01)

Mr McGimpsey: One of the key challenges facing Waterways Ireland is establishing the body as an effectively functioning corporate organisation.

3.30 pm

At present, 250 Waterways Ireland staff are in post. The full staff complement will be 381, of whom 70 will be based in Enniskillen. The recruitment process for the remaining staff is under way. Over 1,400 applications were received by the closing date of 14 December 2001 for 47 new administrative staff posts, of which 41 will be based in Enniskillen. The remaining technical posts to be filled will be advertised in the coming weeks. It is estimated that Waterways Ireland's presence will bring some £2 million to £3 million into the local economy each year.

Mr J Wilson: I refer the Minister to the recent advertisements for posts at Waterways Ireland. If every post were filled, the total salary costs at the bottom of the pay scale would be around £835,000 and those at the top of the pay scale would be over £1 million. Is the Minister satisfied that the number of posts and the resulting costs are necessary to support the work of Waterways Ireland?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must ask the Minister to be brief.

Mr McGimpsey: I will do my best. I am satisfied. Waterways Ireland's budget is £22 million; Northern Ireland's contribution is £3.7 million, in exchange for which we are getting around 1,000 kilometres of navigable waterways managed. We have the potential to create navigable waterways on the upper and lower Lagan, the Newry/Portadown Canal, the Ulster Canal and Lough Neagh. When grafted onto the Shannon-Erne Canal, Lough Erne, the Lower Bann and the waterways system in the South, those developments will create huge potential. Canals in the South are at a sophisticated level of development, and that benefits tourism there. As Mr Gibson and Mr Hussey pointed out, the development of waterways is a means of creating tourism in rural areas.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 8 and 10 in the names of Mr Neeson and Mr McGrady MP respectively have been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

Grants to Potato Processing Plants

1. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) any grant aid paid in the past three years to potato processing plants; and (b) the amounts awarded. (AQO 621/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Regional Development (Ms Rodgers): Through the 1994-99 EU processing and marketing grants scheme, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has assisted potato processors to invest in modern grading, washing, packing and storage facilities. Since 1 January 1999, grant payments totalling £858,000 have been made to potato processors. Non-capital support to encourage better marketing has also been provided under the marketing development scheme. Since 1 January 1999, marketing grants of £89,000 have been paid to potato processors.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Minister investigate the possibility of using her Department's expertise to give marketing advice to our potato growers on what action they might take to deal with the threat of cheap potato

production from eastern European competitors? They are shortly to join the European Union and will be able to trade without restriction in our home markets.

Ms Rodgers: We will certainly be giving marketing advice to our potato producers, because that is part of our role. I assure the Member that we will also enable our farmers to compete better with growers from other countries through processing grants and through our advice on how to improve the quality of their potatoes. We have been particularly aware of that factor in recent years, given the demands by supermarkets for uniform, nice-looking potatoes, which appeal to the customer. My Department has also been working hard to ensure that our producers are in a position to compete in that market.

Mr Poots: What grants have been paid to potato producers, as opposed to potato processors? In the border counties of the Irish Republic, farmers are often paid around £5.8 million. That is making competition much more difficult here. Can the Minister say what money has been paid to Northern Ireland farmers?

Ms Rodgers: I am interested to hear that Mr Poots envies the Republic, but I do not want to comment on that.

I am aware that we have problems with level playing fields in certain sectors. I have had representations made to me from several sectors, and I am looking at that. I am anxious to do something to ensure that our producers, at all levels, are in a position to compete on a level playing field.

There is no provision for capital grants to potato producers. However, my Department works closely with both seed and ware potato groups, the largest of which attracts over 50 growers. Competence development programmes to help improve husbandry skills, which have an impact on returns, also exist. In addition to grants for both processing and marketing, significant support is provided to the Northern Ireland potato sector by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, IDB and LEDU in terms of technical advice and support through Loughry Agricultural College and research and development activities.

Mr Douglas: My question has already been answered.

Fishing Industry Assistance

2. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assistance she will give to the fishing industry in the light of cuts imposed by the EU. (AQO 653/01)

December Fisheries Council

3. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will make a statement on the outcome of the December Fisheries Council. (AQO 631/01)

Quota Allocations for Fish Species

10. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment she has made of the annual quota allocations for each fish species as a result of the December 2000 European Council of Ministers' meeting; and to make a statement.

(AQO 598/01)

Cut in the Nephrops Catch

17. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to support Northern Ireland's fishermen in resisting the 25% cut in their staple nephrops catch proposed by the European Union. (AQO 619/01)

Ms Rodgers: I would like to take questions 2, 3, 10 and 17 together, as they all relate to the same area — the December Fisheries Council and its outcome.

This was a long and arduous meeting, particularly as we were faced with proposals for extremely severe cuts in stocks, including those of particular interest to the local industry. The best deal possible for Northern Ireland in the circumstances was obtained. I was successful in obtaining an increase in the nephrops total allowable catch (TAC) from the proposed 14,175 tons to 17,790 tons. This was no mean achievement, bearing in mind that the European Commission's proposal was for a 25% cut in this TAC. It was reluctant to accept any increase because of its view that the by-catch at this fishery includes stocks under threat.

In addition, increases above the Commission's proposals were obtained for such stocks as Irish Sea cod, plaice, sole and haddock. While I have not made an individual assessment of each fish species for which total allowable catches were agreed, I regard the outcome as successful, particularly for Irish Sea cod. I was grateful for the support of my ministerial colleagues from England, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland during the negotiations. However, the need to conserve fish stocks has to be balanced with the need to protect the industry. During these negotiations I was determined to achieve that balance.

With regard to assistance for the industry, I have already introduced a £5 million fishing vessel decommissioning scheme, the results of which have recently been made known. In addition, I have recently announced the availability of £15 million to fund four new schemes to assist the local industry. These are the improvement of facilities at Northern Ireland's fishing ports, support for aquaculture processing and marketing of freshwater and marine products and promotion of fishery products. I hope to announce, in the not-too-distant future, further assistance schemes, including schemes to help with safety training and an improvement in the quality and marketability of fish on board fishing vessels.

Mr Shannon: Does the Minister agree that the unseen consequences of the EU quota cuts are the impacts on families who have mortgages and unpaid debts et cetera? Can the Minister say what finance will be available to assist with the tie-up scheme for the next few weeks, for example? The Minister said that there would be new schemes for retraining. What finance will be available for those in the fishing industry who want to retrain?

Ms Rodgers: Many of the issues raised by Mr Shannon are a matter for the Department for Social Development, not my Department. I have addressed the question of the tie-up scheme on numerous occasions in the past. It has not previously been policy to provide compensation for a reduction in quotas or for closures. However, I am taking stock of the economic position of the industry following the outcome of the December Fisheries Council meeting. The position is that despite last year's closure, the local industry was able to catch almost all of its cod and haddock quotas and a substantial proportion of the quota for nephrops.

Following the December council outcome, which was quite favourable in terms of overall fishing opportunity, and given the current reduction in the fleet following our decommissioning scheme, there is no strong prima facie case for compensation. I am, however, keeping the situation under review.

The retraining programme that the Member referred to will be resourced by the £25 million of EU funds allocated. Its specific details will be made known as soon as we come to a decision.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her detailed responses and congratulate her and the Department for sticking up for the fishing industry and the agriculture industry when she goes to other places. However, it would appear that the fate of the fishing industry lies largely at the whim of scientific agencies, despite the fact that our experts quite often disagree with their findings. Will the Minister continue to raise these anomalies with her United Kingdom partners and, by so doing, quickly bring more prosperity back to the fishing industry in Northern Ireland?

Ms Rodgers: I do not think that we will ever reach a situation in which the fishermen will agree with the scientists. I endeavour to ensure that the fishermen are part of the consultation exercise. Whereas the Commission has always taken the view that it had to go by the science, this year's proposals for cuts were clearly not in line with the science. I was able to use that strong argument at the council, as did my ministerial counterparts, to ensure that the cuts were not as drastic as those proposed.

I have to be guided by the science community. I cannot use scientific arguments in favour of reducing cuts one year yet refuse to accept them in another year

if they do not suit me. The real issue for the fishing industry and me is to ensure that we find a balance between maintaining a viable industry and conserving the stocks. That is never going to be easy. Looking at the scientific evidence and taking cognisance of it is an important part of that process.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for the detail of her last answer. Does she envisage developing a ten-year plan for Northern Ireland's fishing industry in co-operation with her colleagues in Brussels, so that the Province's fishermen might at least be able to get a medium-term picture of their future?

Ms Rodgers: I have not made any decisions on a ten-year plan for the fishing industry. Again, the difficulty lies in the need to maintain a balance between conservation of stocks and preservation of the industry. A review of the common fisheries policy is under way, and we will contribute to that, as will my counterparts in the United Kingdom and the South of Ireland, because the review will have an impact on what happens in the immediate future.

Mr Dallat: Can the Minister expand on the preparations that took place for the December Fisheries Council? Given the experience gained, will she accept my congratulations on this occasion and assure us that the fight for fair play for our fishermen goes on?

3.45 pm

Ms Rodgers: My preparation for December's European Fisheries Council began when the 1999-2000 Fisheries Council ended. I began to make a case for reversing the 10% cut in prawns, which was a disappointing result, but we fought very hard and had the support of the UK Minister in doing that. In the run-up to the council I met Mr Morley, the Scottish Minister, Mr Finnie, and representatives of the fishing industry to discuss the Commission's proposals. I also had a meeting with Mr Fahey of the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources in Dublin to discuss areas of mutual interest. At all stages, including during the council, I was at pains to reflect the needs and concerns of our local industry. I was very grateful for the support of Mr Morley, Mr Finnie and Mr Fahey.

Organic Farming Development

4. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the strategic study 'Organic Farming in Northern Ireland: A Development Strategy' being undertaken on behalf of her Department; and to make a statement.

(AQO 627/01)

Ms Rodgers: In order to increase market opportunities for organic produce and to encourage the development of a vibrant organic sector in Northern Ireland, I

commissioned consultants to undertake a strategic study on how best to develop organic farming in Northern Ireland. I considered the report to be a realistic view of the prospects of the organic sector against the targets set out in the rural development plan, which is to have 1,000 producers farming 30,000 hectares of land organically by the year 2006. The report emphasises the importance of the organic sector's being marketed if it is to be viable in the long term.

The consultants' report has been the subject of a consultation exercise, and all the comments received are being considered carefully. I am also receiving oral and written representations on organic farming in the context of the Vision for the Future of the Agri-food Industry exercise. The vision report recommends that the organic development strategy should be implemented in full. The consultation period for the vision exercise has been extended to 31 January 2002. I shall wish to take all representations into account as well as the comments of the Assembly Committee before providing a detailed response to the consultants' recommendations.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the Minister's response, and I welcome the report. What are the key strategic goals of the report?

Ms Rodgers: The report has five strategic goals. The first is to increase the production base in Northern Ireland significantly by 2006; the second is to promote the orderly development of a diverse range of market outlets and effective supply chains for organic food produced in Northern Ireland; the third is to increase the competitiveness of all organic producers in Northern Ireland by increasing their technical and managerial capacity for effective production and marketing; the fourth is to develop the capacity of appropriate agencies and organisations to service the needs of the organic sector in Northern Ireland; and the fifth is to secure greater collaboration between organisations to achieve appropriate and coherent action for sector development.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the Minister's launching a report on organic food production. Does she agree that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development should aim at a target higher than 3% for organic produce? As a consequence of foot-and-mouth disease we are more aware of the need for food safety and of the need to monitor imports carefully. Should we not therefore raise our target to the 10% or 20% that other European countries are trying to achieve?

Ms Rodgers: First, I am concerned that there is an implication in the Member's question that food that is not organic is not safe. I should like to knock that on the head. Three per cent is a realistic target at this stage, and we have the funds to meet it. We must also look carefully at the market.

There are two issues that come up in organic farming. First, we have to keep our eye on the market. At the moment, demand exceeds what is available. For obvious reasons, the premium could drop, so we have to take cognisance of all the issues. At the moment, 3% is a realistic target, and we have the funds to meet it.

I do not want to raise expectations unnecessarily, but I want to repeat that although organic food is a marketable product at the moment, we are anxious that in Northern Ireland we should be able to meet our market needs and not have to import from other countries. I do not want anyone to run away with the idea that if it is not organic, it is not safe. All our food in Northern Ireland, especially our beef, is as safe as you can get.

Mr Ford: In that interchange the Minister highlighted the issue of production, as opposed to marketing, of new niche products such as organic produce. However, in the light of the target of 1,000 producers with 30,000 hectares within five years, can she give an indication of the uptake so far in the organic farm scheme?

Ms Rodgers: The uptake so far is 72 scheme participants, which is only half the number anticipated at this stage. That is mainly due to the effects of the foot-and-mouth disease situation, which meant that necessary on-farm inspections by organic sector bodies could not take place. However, we anticipate increased interest in the scheme in 2002.

Support for Farmers

5. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her support for farmers who wish to remain in the farming industry. (AQO 651/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department provides an extensive range of practical and financial support to the agriculture industry. This includes business and technical advice, training and education, animal disease control and eradication, research and development and technology transfer, to name a few.

Perhaps the most graphic illustration of the help on offer from my Department is the fact that it administers various national and CAP support mechanisms, which collectively pay out some £200 million each year in direct subsidies to Northern Irish farmers. That is an average of £6,700 per farm business. It also has a role to play in the administration of CAP market support mechanisms, which are estimated to be worth up to a further £100 million per annum to Northern Irish farmers and are particularly important in supporting the dairy sector. The Department also operates measures such as the rural development and forestry programmes, which provide substantial additional direct and indirect support to the agricultural and rural communities.

Mr Hussey: Towards the end of her answer the Minister mentioned various schemes that are peripheral to the farming industry at times. She also referred to the dairy industry. Various Members and, indeed, the Minister will no doubt have received alarming information on the current position of the dairy industry. Does the Minister agree with the Ulster Farmer's Union (UFU) assessment that Northern Ireland's dairy sector is in a precarious position, with the threat of intervention building?

The Minister will be aware that an important meeting of the EU Dairy Management Committee will take place this Thursday. Can she detail her representations to Secretary of State Margaret Beckett on the present threat to our dairy industry, and can she assure the House that the UK representative on the Committee will be seeking more realistic levels of export refunds for skimmed milk powder and, in particular, whole milk powder to reflect the collapse in world market prices for milk powders?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before the Minister answers, I remind Members that supplementary questions are supposed to be related directly to the original question, and there is some licence there.

Ms Rodgers: The question is OK. I am fully aware of the difficulties of the dairy industry at the moment, and I have had a meeting with the industry and the president of the UFU.

The fact that the industry can use only 15% of its fluid milk in Northern Ireland does create a large problem for the industry when export refunds are cut. We are heavily dependent on the export of milk powders to other countries. Given the present state of the market and the current level of EU support, export refunds are clearly insufficient to maintain producer prices.

At last week's meeting in London with the UK agriculture Ministers, I impressed upon Ms Beckett the need to put pressure on the EU Commission to secure a significant increase in refunds. That is necessary if prices are to be stabilised and we are to avoid undermining the financial stability of this important sector for Northern Ireland. We did receive modest increases in November and December, but the need to get further increases was impressed upon Ms Beckett, and she has taken my point on board. UKRep is fully apprised of the importance of the issue for us.

Mr Kane: Will the Minister accept that timely disbursement of EU premium payments would be an indication of her support for the industry?

Ms Rodgers: Yes, I agree that timely payments are a priority, and I always endeavour to ensure that payments are made as quickly as possible. We did have some difficulty this year with the suckler cow premium payments because of the Commission's additional

requirement to cross-check the payments. That created some slight delays.

Overall, however, my Department has a good track record of timely payments. In October 2001 the Department published the annual profile of premia payments for 2001-02. Since 24 October my Department has issued over £57 million in subsidy payments to farmers, and a further £4.3 million will issue to the industry by the end of January. Overall, payments are being made either within the target times or very soon afterwards. My officials will continue to strive to deliver on the challenging targets specified in the profile.

Outreach Tourism

6. **Mr McMenamin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the Outreach Tourism measures available under the rural development strategy; and to make a statement. (AQO 638/01)

Ms Rodgers: The main tourism measure under the rural development programme is the natural resource rural tourism initiative. This Peace II measure will be delivered by five locally-based partnership bodies and will support tourism projects that utilise the natural resources of five of Northern Ireland's most disadvantaged rural areas.

The rural intermediary funding body will also deliver a tourism-related Peace II measure to assist rural communities to promote local identity, culture and heritage, with an emphasis on peace and reconciliation. The rural development programme can also deliver tourism support under the programme for building sustainable prosperity. That can assist local area-based or sectoral projects and programmes to develop quality tourism products in rural areas. The LEADER+ element of the rural development programme also has scope to support small-scale innovative tourism businesses.

Under INTERREG III, the proposed rural initiative measure includes opportunities to support local cross-border tourism.

Mr McMenamin: How have the proposed natural resource rural tourism initiative areas been defined, and which local partnerships will deliver the initiative?

Ms Rodgers: Parts of Northern Ireland are disadvantaged but have the potential to develop and sustain a strong tourism product based on their natural resources. It was decided, therefore, that the core of the target area should be rural areas that are disadvantaged and have an official designation in respect of their landscape or environmental quality — for example, being an environmentally sensitive area (ESA) or an area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB).

The partnerships are the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust, the South Armagh Tourism Initiative,

the Mourne Heritage Trust, Sperrins Tourism Ltd and Shadow Fermanagh Local Strategy Partnership in collaboration with Fermanagh Lakeland Trust.

4.00 pm

Mr Armstrong: Farmers are willing to diversify their means of income, and they must. Tourism is one way of achieving that. Will the Minister tell the House what action she is taking to rejuvenate the Department's rural development strategy in the light of dwindling farm incomes in recent years? Can she assure us that the initiatives will be led by farmers and will benefit the family farm?

Ms Rodgers: My Department has been anxious to ensure that farmers and farming families should become involved in rural development. In the last tranche of rural development, there seemed to be resistance on the part of the farming community, because rural development was seen to be competing with farming. There is now a stronger appreciation that rural development is complementary to, and supportive of, diversification. It is as supportive of farming families as it is of the rest of the rural community.

My Department, the rural development advisors and I are anxious to work with farm groups and the farmers' union. We have been working to ensure that farmers are aware of the opportunities that arise from rural development programmes and are enabled to participate in and profit from them.

LEADER II: Funding Applications

7. **Mr Carrick** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to say (a) what procedures are in place to co-ordinate funding applications under the LEADER II Programme that are the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's responsibility; and (b) which applications are processed by other agencies such as the Rural Development Council and the Rural Community Network. (AQO 613/01)

Mr Deputy Speaker: Unfortunately, I must ask the Minister to make her answer brief.

Ms Rodgers: The LEADER II programme has been closed to application since 31 December 1999, and we have now embarked upon the LEADER+ programme. Funding applications under the current structural funds round will be recorded on a central applications database, which has been developed by the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). Although the database was devised initially for the Building Sustainable Prosperity and Peace II programmes, work is underway to link LEADER+ applications to it.

All the delivery agents under the rural development programme, such as LEADER action groups, the

Rural Development Council and the Rural Community Network, will be required to use the computer database, which will provide early warning of possible duplicate applications. Co-ordination will also be achieved in other ways. For example, the Department's rural area co-ordinators will have a key role in co-ordinating the various rural development measures. In addition, the Department has produced a user-friendly signposting brochure to guide potential applicants through the various measures. That brochure is readily available at all programme outlets.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Unfortunately, there is no time for a supplementary question.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Rents for Constituency Offices

1. **Mr Ford** asked the Assembly Commission, in the light of the review being conducted by the House of Commons Commission, what plans it has to review arrangements for the payment of rent for constituency offices. (AQO 616/01)

Mr Wells: The Member is correct to say that the House of Commons Commission is conducting such a review. However, that review is under way, and it would therefore be inappropriate to pre-empt any conclusions that may arise from it.

The Member will also be aware that the Assembly Commission recently asked the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) to review Members' salaries, allowances and pension arrangements. The review will examine all areas associated with Members' allowances, including the payment of rent for constituency offices. The review is a three-stage process in which all parties, including the Member's own, have every opportunity to contribute. Hay Management Consultants, on behalf of the review body, have just concluded the job analysis element of the review. Parties have also had the opportunity to submit written evidence, and the review body will take oral evidence on 29 January. I encourage all Members to take this opportunity to raise any issues that concern their parties about the current arrangements. Again, it would be inappropriate to comment on any issue covered by the review in advance of the SSRB's report of its findings in April of this year. However, I assure the Member that the Assembly Commission will consider carefully the conclusions and recommendations presented by the SSRB.

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Wells for the response on behalf of the Commission. I refer to it and to a written answer that I received from his Colleague, Mr Fee, last week. It appears not to address the issue raised by my question at a time of widespread cynicism about

political life in every part of this country and in the Republic.

First, does the Assembly Commission have access to the House of Commons review of the payment of office rents? Secondly, is there reason to believe that what happened in Scotland may happen here, because it seems that there are no procedures to prevent it? Thirdly, in the light of Mr Fee's response, which suggested that there was no monitoring of the use of Assembly Members' offices for electoral purposes last year, should the Commission not be more proactive in monitoring? Merely reporting that 19 Members had declared the use of their offices is at least a step forward, but it does not go far enough to deal with the cynicism that exists.

Mr Wells: The Commission does not have access to the material submitted to the House of Commons review and will not have access to it until the report has been published. I emphasise that before a Member can submit an invoice for rent, a valid rental agreement must be submitted to the Finance Office, and it is carefully checked.

The use of Assembly Members' constituency offices causes enormous difficulties because there are 108 Assembly Members, some of whom may have two or even three constituency offices. Barring asking Assembly staff to sit outside their offices every day taking note of who goes in and out and for what purpose, it would be very difficult to monitor the continuous use of offices. The Assembly Finance Office monitors the situation carefully, and a complaint drawn to its attention is investigated immediately.

Parliament Buildings (Use by Community and Voluntary Groups)

2. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Assembly Commission to detail what provision it is making to subsidise community and voluntary groups using the facilities in Parliament Buildings. (AQO 634/01)

Mr Wells: The Assembly Commission is very conscious of its accountability and therefore does not provide subsidies to any group using the facilities in Parliament Buildings. The Commission believes that that would be a misuse of public moneys. Members may sponsor functions in Parliament Buildings. I am sure that Members want the Commission to ensure that all financial proprieties are observed in managing functions in Parliament Buildings.

If the Member is referring to the costs associated with the running of the various catering outlets in Parliament Buildings, I can advise her that all those fall into two categories: internal and external. Internal costs are those associated with the operation or function of Assembly business, for example, the basement dining

room and the Members' dining room. In this case the Assembly Commission has, through a process of competitive tendering, put in place a cost plus contract, whereby all costs associated with the functioning of Assembly business are borne by the Assembly Commission.

External functions are not directly associated with the running of the Northern Ireland Assembly, therefore the direct labour element of the service provision, in addition to the cost of refreshments, is borne by the external organisation. However, I emphasise that no recurrent overhead costs such as heat, electricity, cost of room hire or security at weekends are borne by the external organisations. The Assembly Commission continually monitors all costs associated with the functioning of the Assembly to ensure that it achieves value for money. Where costs can be reduced without compromising accountability, the Commission will do so.

Ms Lewsley: This Building should be accessible to everybody. Often the organisations that visit here can bear the catering cost; voluntary groups, however, may find that more difficult. I sponsored a voluntary group to visit Parliament Buildings at the beginning of November. It had to cancel, because it was asked to pay £80. I understand what the Member says about catering. However, is the Commission aware there were 100 people coming that day but that only 60 chairs were available in the Long Gallery? The organisation was going to have to bear the cost of hiring 40 chairs at £2·00 each. There was no crèche facility — all it was asking for was a room. What will the Commission do in future for such facilities?

Mr Wells: The Member raises a valid point. The Assembly Commission is aware of that difficulty. At present, an external function that has anticipated more than 60 attendees cannot be catered for without additional seating: we have only 60 chairs. The Assembly must bear the cost of hiring extra chairs at approximately £2·35 a chair. That is added to the cost of the function, because the Assembly passes it on to the organiser. However, the Commission is aware of the problem and has asked the Office of the Keeper of the House to investigate the costs of purchasing additional chairs. It will report to the Commission on the matter, and the Commission will assess whether that option is cost-effective. If it proves to be so, additional chairs will be bought so that community groups, such as the one that the Member mentioned, will not be placed in that position.

Crèche facilities have not yet been considered, but I am sure that the Commission will want to take that on board. That is a very good point.

Relocation of Staff

3. **Mr Hussey** asked the Assembly Commission to make a statement on the relocation of staff out of Parliament Buildings. (AQO 649/01)

Mr Wells: At an early stage in the Commission's consideration of the Assembly's staffing needs, it became clear that the accommodation in Parliament Buildings would be unable to cater for the needs of Members, Ministers and party support staff. It is planned to increase the staff to 450, including existing staff in the Assembly Secretariat. Parliament Buildings was built in 1932 to accommodate a Parliament of that time. The building is unable to meet the accommodation requirements of a modern legislative Assembly.

In 2000, an economic appraisal arranged by the Commission considered all options for meeting the Assembly's additional accommodation requirements. The appraisal recommended Ormiston House as the preferred option, and, in September 2001, the Commission secured its purchase at a cost of £9 million.

The Commission's long-term plan is to renovate the house and outbuildings to provide additional permanent office accommodation for some Secretariat staff. In the medium term, it is proposed to provide a temporary office building in the grounds of Ormiston House. The Planning Service is considering a plan for Crown development approval.

In mid-2001, with approximately 300 staff in place, the Commission decided to relieve some of the pressure on the accommodation within Parliament Buildings by moving approximately 30 staff in the Finance and Personnel directorate to temporary accommodation in Annexe C beside Dundonald House. In doing so, the Commission recognised the need to maintain a continuity of service and staff of the Finance and Personnel Directorate in Parliament Buildings. The Member is aware that one or two staff remain available for consultation on the fourth floor of Parliament Buildings.

The Commission has not yet taken a decision on which staff and functions will move permanently, but every effort will be made to minimise any disruption to Members that could potentially arise from the management of a split site.

Mr Hussey: I congratulate the Commission and the Finance and Personnel staff on how things are currently being managed. Given the possible transfer of the administration of justice and the office of the Attorney-General to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2003, is the Commission satisfied that sufficient accommodation will be available for additional staff?

Mr Wells: The Commission is content that this Building and the new facility at Ormiston House will provide enough office accommodation for everyone. The Ormiston House site, which I visited with other Commission members, is extensive. Although one or two planning issues must be resolved, that building will prove an excellent facility when it is entirely renovated. It should be of more than sufficient size to

cope with all anticipated demand in the foreseeable future.

Mr S Wilson: I am somewhat surprised that the Assembly Commission has spent £9 million on a building where extensive planning difficulties exist — not least that the Belfast urban area plan did not permit the size of office accommodation that is currently being considered.

Is the Member aware of the extensive opposition in the local area to the site, especially the traffic implications for what is a residential area? What plans has the Commission to ensure that, if the Planning Service allows the application to proceed, the traffic will be diverted away from the residential area and through an entrance to Ormiston House that will cause fewer problems for local people?

Mr Wells: I advise the hon Member for East Belfast to consult his colleague Mr Peter Robinson, a former estate agent. Were he to do so, he would be told that the purchase of that site for £9 million was an absolute bargain in commercial terms. Had that site been put on the open market, it would certainly have secured a much higher price for property development. In respect of wise use of the Exchequer's money, it has been a very good move, and should it transpire that development of the Ormiston site is not possible, it can be sold on by the Commission at a substantial profit. I wish I could have 10% of that profit, but unfortunately that is not allowed.

4.15 pm

We are aware of the significant level of opposition from those living in the vicinity of Ormiston House. We took the initiative of calling a public meeting in a local school, and all residents were invited to make their comments. In addition, a subcommittee was formed with a group of residents to liaise with us directly on the implications for them of that development. We also took it upon ourselves to meet with the chief executive of Roads Service to discuss difficulties with access, and I understand that some progress has been made.

At the end of the process the Member will be absolutely convinced that the Commission has bent over backwards to meet the concerns of the residents, and I wish that every developer concerned in such an operation would go down the same path.

Disparities in Pay and Conditions

4. **Mr McElduff** asked the Assembly Commission how it will redress disparities in pay and conditions between directly recruited staff and those seconded from the Civil Service. (AQO 610/01)

Mr Wells: First, it is important to clarify the reasons for any disparities in pay and conditions between

directly recruited staff and those seconded from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Staff recruited directly from a wide variety of employment backgrounds as part of the Assembly Commission's commitment to publicly advertise all jobs accept the Assembly's terms and conditions, which are at this stage broadly in line with those of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. However — and this is crucial — it is the policy of the Assembly Commission that secondees from outside organisations retain their existing terms and conditions. In the case of Northern Ireland Civil Service secondees there is an entitlement to excess fares. Direct recruits have no such entitlement.

All those issues will be considered in the context of the current fundamental review of the Assembly Secretariat's terms and conditions, together with pay and grading. As part of that review the Commission has asked consultants to identify any disparities and inequalities in the current arrangements and to make recommendations on how differentials can be addressed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McElduff, Mr Wells might not have time to answer a supplementary question, but he can give you a written answer.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat. Can the Member who represents the Commission assure me that equal pay for equal work applies to all employees in the Assembly? Can he detail the number of Assembly employees currently on temporary contracts?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Wells, unfortunately our time is up. Perhaps you would make a written response to Mr McElduff.

INDEPENDENT COMMISSION OF INQUIRY

Ms McWilliams: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the UK Government to expedite, as agreed, their provision of all relevant documents and files to the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the 1974 Dublin and Monaghan bombings, which is chaired by the former Irish Supreme Court Judge, Henry Barron.

At approximately 5.30 pm on the afternoon of 17 May 1974 a terrible atrocity took place in the city of Dublin. Another took place later that same evening in Monaghan. Thirty-three people were killed, and over 300 were injured as a result of bomb explosions. A bus strike in Dublin that day meant that there were more pedestrians than usual in the streets when the bombs went off. It may well be understood that the explosions created pandemonium. Inside 90 seconds three bombs exploded in Parnell Street, Talbot Street and South Leinster Street. Ninety minutes later, a further bomb exploded outside a Monaghan pub which, incidentally, was owned by a Protestant family. The suffering and anguish of those families is similar to that of the families of those who died in Omagh, but their experience has been treated quite differently.

Frank Massey, whose 21-year-old daughter died six weeks before her wedding, summed up their feelings. He said:

“We have been treated like lepers.”

The families feel betrayed.

Alice O'Brien lost her sister, brother-in-law and two nieces in the Dublin bombings. When researching the background of the bombings, I was moved to learn that those two babies, aged 15 months and seven months, lay unidentified because no one knew until the next day that their parents had also been killed. Alice O'Brien said:

“As families we wish to bring closure to our suffering through knowing the truth. For twenty five years we have endured the costly and unnecessary ordeal of fighting a legal battle to gain access to Garda files. As well as being the innocent victims of an atrocity we have had to endure the ignominy of fighting our own political and police authorities.”

That is only the beginning of their story.

Some of us were members of the team that negotiated the Good Friday Agreement. In the agreement we wrote that

“it is essential to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence as a necessary element of reconciliation.”

As a consequence of those words, a victims' commissioner for Northern Ireland, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, was appointed. The Republic of Ireland also has a victims' commissioner, Mr John Wilson. I pay tribute to Mr

Wilson, whom I have met often as a result of my work with the families of the disappeared.

John Wilson wrote a report for the Irish Government on the needs of victims and included in it what he had heard from the families of those killed in the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. He requested that the Irish Government do something about it.

In January 2000, the Dublin Government established an Independent Commission of Inquiry into the Dublin and Monaghan Bombings that is now headed by Mr Justice Barron, a former judge of the Supreme Court. In that year, the Taoiseach told the Dáil that he expected a report from the inquiry to be presented to a joint Oireachtas Committee by May. He later informed the Dáil that he expected the report to issue before the summer recess in June 2000. He then said that he expected the report by September 2000. It is now January 2002, and the report has not been completed.

The terms of reference of the independent inquiry were that the facts, circumstances, causes and perpetrators of the bombings be investigated and that the nature, extent and adequacy of the garda investigations, including the co-operation of the relevant authorities in Northern Ireland and the handling of evidence, including the scientific analysis of forensic evidence, also be investigated. Also, the reasons why no prosecutions took place, whether the investigations had been impeded, and if so by whom and to what extent, should be identified, and the issues raised by the Yorkshire Television documentary 'Hidden Hand: The Forgotten Massacre' broadcast in 1993 should be considered.

The terms of reference were clear. However, yet again, almost a year has passed since Mr Justice Barron made a formal request to the UK Government to release documents that would enable the inquiry to bring the matter to a conclusion. The Prime Minister met the Taoiseach and agreed to facilitate Mr Justice Barron in his search for the files. Last week, the Secretary of State met Mr Justice Barron and said that police and forensic documents had been handed over. However, Mr Justice Barron still awaits many more documents.

The amount of relevant documentation is a disputed issue. Apparently, the Northern Ireland Office holds 68,000 documents — not including those held by the Ministry of Defence. The Secretary of State said that it has taken a considerable amount of time to go through the documents in order to provide a file for Mr Justice Barron. Quite rightly, the families do not understand why it has taken so long to provide the documents; it has been almost a year. It might have made more sense to provide such an enormous file of documents every month or every two months rather than hand them all over at once. Some people may now argue that the delay in the handover is stalling the inquiry and that,

in the absence of the files, Mr Justice Barron may conclude that he cannot carry on with it.

It gives the impression that there is something to hide, and that should not be the case. To date, the garda investigation file remains open. The coroner has stated that he is prepared to reopen the inquests that took place so shortly after the bombings and that were closed so quickly. The families have always wanted a public statutory inquiry, but they have a private independent inquiry in its place. The least that they deserve is for that inquiry to reach its conclusions. The loss of their loved ones seems to have been compounded at every stage, initially by the Irish Government, and now by the UK Government.

There has been an enormous loss of faith in the institutions of the Republic, which, through officials' actions, omissions and denials, have prevented the full disclosure of events. If people in Northern Ireland know anything about conflict resolution, it is that the least that the victims of the troubles deserve is to know what happened and why — to have the truth and to have closure on terrible events. Those families have not had that, and it is little wonder that they sum up what has happened to them as "a trust betrayed".

I tabled the motion because we should be able to say to those victims, and to all victims who approach us in the Assembly, that they have our unanimous support. I hope that we can take the transcript of today's debate to the Secretary of State and ask for action to be taken. Perhaps in one month's time, the file will be available, and Justice Barron will be able to close his inquiry. The Irish Government will have to decide what to do following that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The debate must conclude at 5.00 pm. All Members will be limited to approximately four minutes.

Mr A Maginness: I thank Ms McWilliams for tabling the motion — it is useful that the matter has been brought to the Floor. The motion should not cause controversy in the House. The UK Government have agreed to co-operate with the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the Dublin and Monaghan Bombings. The problem is that the Government have failed to provide that inquiry with all the information that has been requested. The delay is becoming intolerable. It is appropriate for the House to deal with the matter and to emphasise the necessity for the British Government to make a full and true disclosure as soon as possible.

The issues of transparency, accountability and public confidence are central to the case. We must remember that the Dublin and Monaghan bombings were the worst atrocity in the history of the troubles. Even the terrible atrocity at Omagh was not as great. The inquiry is long overdue and was not initiated

lightly by the Irish Government. Many unanswered questions remain. Some 33 people were killed in those appalling attacks, for which no one has yet been charged. There have been persistent allegations that known suspects were not pursued, despite eyewitness identification. We must therefore examine the issues. If possible, we must reassure the families that everything has been done and that suspects have been pursued but not yet brought to justice because of a lack of evidence or another factor.

The issue is not confined to the existence, or otherwise, of adequate evidence to secure convictions, however. It extends to wider issues that concern the procedures that were followed in response to the attacks — from the alleged connections between suspects, the RUC and the UDR to the level of co-operation offered by the RUC to the Garda Síochána. It also concerns the capacity of the UVF, which was clearly responsible for the atrocities, to have carried out such an attack without outside assistance.

4.30 pm

There is a real suspicion that they had that assistance, because it is doubtful that they would have had the technical capacity to carry out such an attack at that time.

The families of those killed, and the survivors of those atrocities, are entitled to accurate information on how those events arose, the competency of the investigations that were conducted by the Garda Síochána and the RUC and why no one has ever been prosecuted. The families of the victims of the Dublin and Monaghan bombs have a right to know exactly what happened, just as the families of the Omagh bombing are entitled to know the details of the police investigations.

Some events of our recent history have been of such magnitude that they now represent the core of our conflict — and the Dublin and Monaghan bombings are part of that core. The SDLP wants such representative issues to be examined so that the fresh air of accurate information can bring about the healing process, as Monica McWilliams rightly referred to it, and so that procedures can be established to prevent any recurrence of past wrongdoings. The SDLP believes that if key questions are not adequately answered, that will have a long-term and damaging impact on our efforts to move forward. We therefore support the motion and urge the British Government to fulfil their duty to provide full and accurate disclosure.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am grateful to Monica McWilliams for tabling this important motion. I fully endorse her introductory comments and Alban Maginness's contribution.

Although I fully support the case that has been made, I do not wish to cover old ground. In the context of a conflict resolution process, it is important that we

examine the clear evidence relating to many incidents, particularly multiple killings by Loyalist gangs that were later shown to have been penetrated, and sometimes controlled, by RUC Special Branch or British military intelligence. The Dublin and Monaghan bombings are a particularly horrific example of that.

Other examples are easily brought to mind, and the current controversy over the investigation — if it is appropriate to call it that — into the Omagh bombing shows that a hidden hand is at work. Republican, Nationalist and, in particular, Unionist representatives must address that dimension of the “dirty war” in Ireland, because there can never be full reconciliation, closure or peace until that aspect of the troubles is included in the examination of the activities of Republicans and Loyalists. That forms part of society's understanding of how certain circumstances arose and why they were permitted to continue for so long.

These events happened almost 28 years ago. Since then strenuous efforts have been made to elucidate the inexplicable failure to follow through on available evidence and to examine the precision that had never been demonstrated before or since by the UVF gang that claimed responsibility and which subsequently claimed to have acted on its own. That happened despite evidence from court records at the time, and for a long time afterwards, that the gang had been penetrated by British military intelligence. Why did the authorities in the Twenty-six Counties fail to confront and deal with this suppression of information? Why was the Garda inquiry wound down within three months? It is significant that when the Omagh investigation is scrutinised, exactly the same pattern emerges. First, there is an initial response, when the Government appear to act with authority and urgency and resources are poured into the investigation. Subsequently that turns out to have been a façade, important information has been suppressed and in some instances important evidence has been destroyed. After much propaganda and publicity the investigation is substantially wound down.

In the case of Dublin and Monaghan there is a linkage to the difficulties that are now confronting those who are bringing forward arguments for full accountability and transparency. The answer is to be found in exposing, once and for all, the role of British military intelligence and the RUC Special Branch in the manipulation of those Loyalist death squads over that period of time. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Morrow: I was not going to say anything on the motion, but as I listened to the contributions from some Members, I decided that perhaps I should speak. It is interesting that some Members have stated that the motion should not divide the House and that it is not a motion that is pointing the finger. However, it is also interesting that some Members have stated that Unionists have something to answer for in relation to

what happened in Dublin and Monaghan. As a Unionist, I have absolutely nothing to answer for on that.

Politicians of all ilks tell the House that it is time we moved on, that it is time to draw a line under the past and let history be the judge. Of course that is not what is being proposed in the motion, any more than what is being proposed in relation to the inquiry into Bloody Sunday. I do not hear those same people calling for an inquiry into Teebane. I do not hear a cry for an inquiry into the slaughter at the La Mon House Hotel or into the slaughter in Enniskillen in my constituency. I do not hear a great clamour for an inquiry into the atrocity in Omagh, other than its being used as a yardstick and an opportunity to pillory the security forces. I do not hear about an inquiry into Bloody Friday. There have been many acts of slaughter in this Province, yet inquiries are called for only in cases in which Republicans claim that there has been security force collusion. Every opportunity is seized upon to denigrate the forces of law and order and to put them behind the eight ball. I have no doubt that that is what is happening here.

Ms McWilliams stated that she had no political axe to grind on this, that it was simply a matter of getting to the facts. Alban Maginness again referred to security force collusion. According to some Members of the House, every time there is an atrocity such as this, it seems that there must be security force collusion.

We either move on, or we stand still, or we are selective. Some want to turn a blind eye to all the atrocities, but some of them were more heinous than others, as if that is possible. Yet, some of the most heinous atrocities do not seem to be of any consequence. That is something that we on the Unionist side find very hard to understand.

With no disrespect to Prof McWilliams, I have yet to hear her call for an inquiry into Enniskillen, where people were slaughtered while attending a Remembrance Day service. I have yet to hear her talk about Teebane, where Protestant workers were slaughtered on their way home. I have yet to hear her talk in the Assembly about La Mon House Hotel, but maybe I have got it wrong. Maybe she has referred to all the incidents.

The least that the Assembly must ask for is a degree of consistency. Let me make it quite clear that I have no brief whatsoever for those who carry out such atrocities. I do not believe that anybody should be marked out because of his politics. However, I would like to see a degree of consistency and less hypocrisy when Members are speaking here. When I am told that this is another one that is being referred to as part of the dirty war and that this is something that Unionists will have to address, I find that very hard to take, particularly coming from a group that is inextricably linked to the greatest killing machine in the whole of western Europe. That group is not cutting —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Morrow, I must be very strict with time.

Mr Morrow: That group is not cutting any ice with the Unionist community when it comes out with talk like that.

Mr McCarthy: I thank Prof McWilliams for bringing this important subject to the Floor of the Assembly. I am somewhat disappointed in Dr McCrea. I assure him that I do not regard him as a Unionist who is involved in any of those things. There may be some misapprehension, but I would not go along with that.

I hope that the Assembly supports the motion to help bring about an end to the suffering of the friends and relations of all the innocent people who were slaughtered on that day in both Monaghan and Dublin. Of course, many other people in our community have suffered grievously, and they have yet to see the perpetrators convicted and/or get answers about the circumstances that led to the deaths of their loved ones. I only have to refer to last week, when we remembered the Teebane slaughter. We offer our sympathy to those people who are still looking for justice for that atrocity.

The problem with the atrocities in Dublin and Monaghan is the commitments that were given by our Government some time ago that have not yet been honoured. The Irish Government set up the independent commission of inquiry in January 2000, after pressure from the relatives of those killed and injured, because after so many years no one has been apprehended or brought to justice for perpetrating those horrendous outrages against innocent human beings. Of course, as I have said, that applies equally to all the outrages committed during the last 30 years.

Much has been written about the atrocities in Monaghan and Dublin, and rightly so. Fingers are pointed in many directions, but when the commission was set up, people were hopeful that answers would be forthcoming. At the time, the British Government gave an assurance of co-operation with the commission. Unfortunately, to date little or no co-operation has been forthcoming, and that is why we are discussing this today — in the hope that that will be put right.

The longer the saga continues, the more suspicions and rumours are created, which does nobody any good. We are all aware of the commitments and goodwill that were given by our Government — by Mr Blair, Adam Ingram, John Reid and many others — to help provide information to the commission of inquiry.

4.45 pm

So far that commitment has not been honoured. Those gentlemen are hon Members of the British Government, and I urge them to do the decent thing and provide this vital information as soon as possible. We often hear people say that they support the victims of violence.

This is a real opportunity to show that actions speak louder than words. Relations between Britain and the whole of Ireland are presently in good standing. I am thankful that, since the start of the all-party discussions that led to the Good Friday Agreement, relations between all the people in these islands have been at an all-time high. Let that continue.

Only this week, relatives yet again expressed deep disappointment at the outcome of a meeting between Mr Reid and Justice Barron. Again John Reid, our Secretary of State, said:

“I will do all I can to see we are as helpful as possible.”

While that was a welcome statement, after nearly two years it falls far short of what is now required. All files held by the Government on the atrocities committed on that awful day, 17 May 1974, must now be produced in full to Justice Barron. Only then can the relatives begin to see justice. The Alliance Party fully supports this motion and hopes that our Government will listen to the words of the Assembly.

Mr C Wilson: My party would be pleased to support a motion in this House from any party that adheres to the democratic process for an inquiry into any act of terrorism in the United Kingdom or the Irish Republic, if we believed that the purpose of that inquiry was to ascertain the truth and apprehend those responsible for acts of murder and maiming. That would be true whatever group was involved — whether Republican or so-called Loyalist terrorists.

However, having listened to Ms McWilliams, I will say most emphatically that we will not be party to what is clearly a farce. Ms McWilliams had the audacity to inform us about her and her party’s involvement in the Belfast Agreement — an agreement that brought unreconstructed, unrepentant terrorists back onto the streets of the Province to return to their trade. It was a process that did not put terrorists in the dock, in court or in jail but into the Government of Northern Ireland.

As Mr Morrow has pointed out, many events in Northern Ireland require inquiries. I am not just offended by the jurisdiction — by the fact that Ms McWilliams and her Colleagues feel that they should start calling for inquiries into the events that occurred in Dublin and Monaghan. When one reads of those events, one is struck by their similarity to the 30 years of violence and, as some have mentioned, the bloody Fridays that we have had in Northern Ireland. Indeed, every day was a bloody day in Northern Ireland — 365 days of the year, every year for over 30 years.

Ms McWilliams and her Colleagues have suddenly had some attack of conscience on this matter. What I find most offensive is that it is clear that she and her Colleagues, other Members on the opposite side of the House and those who signed up to the Belfast Agreement

are now prepared to endorse the latest move by the British Government under the terms of the Weston Park agreement. Those who are currently on the run for acts of terrorism are going to be given an amnesty. If she had anything genuine in her heart on this matter, she would not support that.

There is no point in having an inquiry to find out who organised, assisted and planted the bombs in Monaghan and Dublin if one is not prepared to take the next logical step: once you ascertain who was responsible, you apprehend them and bring them to justice. That is what the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland require. Those responsible must be put in jail, not granted amnesties. I did not vote in this House, as these Members had the absolutely disgusting audacity to do, to put those who front terrorist organisations — “inextricably linked” to terror, to quote the Prime Minister — into positions such as that of Minister of Education and Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland.

If we are to have public inquiries in Northern Ireland, let us have an inquiry into the activities in the days leading up to Bloody Friday of Mr Gerry Adams, the commander of the Belfast brigade of the IRA, responsible for organising and orchestrating that violence. Let us have an investigation into the activities of Martin McGuinness, that self-proclaimed member of the IRA — and we all know his role in that.

I will return, Mr Deputy Speaker — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Wilson, I remind you that you must speak to the motion. You have moved off it substantially. I have given you quite a licence.

Mr C Wilson: Ms McWilliams will need to explain to the victims of violence in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland why, when she is calling for this investigation on the one hand, she is saying, with her great experience of South Africa, that all she really wants to know is the truth. She does not want to go any further because that might ruffle a few feathers. It is OK to call for those who orchestrated and organised the bombing of Omagh to be brought to justice, but, we are told, the Sinn Féin Members who are glaring at us from across the Chamber must have immunity so that in the future the Minister of Education cannot be removed from his post and put in jail where he belongs.

Mr McFarland: The Dublin and Monaghan bombings were appalling tragedies, and those responsible should have been brought to justice. However, while there was evidence, the Irish authorities considered that is was not enough to lead to convictions.

I am concerned about the glee with which Sinn Féin approaches these subjects in the House. It sees Brit plots everywhere, and we have another one today. I am

concerned about the present one-way traffic of these inquiries, and many Members have also drawn attention to that. Ms McWilliams talked about victims having a right to know what happened. There are over 3,000 victims who have a right to know what happened. The majority were victims of the Provisional IRA.

Where is the clamour by Amnesty International, the Committee on the Administration of Justice, the Human Rights Commission and others who quickly take up these causes? Where is the clamour to investigate the outrages of the past 30 years? We do not hear it. I have warned repeatedly in the House about having a truth commission. If we have learnt anything from South Africa, it is that we should not continue examining the entrails of the last 30 years. People from both communities in Northern Ireland need, and mostly want, to put the conflict behind them. Let us leave this behind us. If we get into 30 years' worth of murder and mayhem and over 3,000 deaths, with each one being investigated to find out who did it and when, this conflict will never end. We will be at this in another 50 years with accusations across the Floor of the House between the communities about who did what and when. We should put this conflict behind us and let these issues lie.

Ms McWilliams: Let us all be assured that the things that have happened in the past need to be opened up. John Paul Lederach visited Northern Ireland to address victims' conferences — many of which I attended. He said to remember and to change — he did not say to forget. He said to remember everything that has happened to you, to change and to learn lessons from it to ensure that it does not happen again.

For those Members who are concerned about my moving this motion, every time there have been human rights abuses, currently or in the past, I have asked for them to be investigated. I have especially asked for an investigation for the families of the disappeared. I will continue to work with the families of the disappeared in Northern Ireland to ensure that they get some truth, even if they never get their bodies returned for Christian burial.

The inquiry is already established. This motion is not calling for an inquiry; it is calling for the closure of that inquiry. It is already up and running. Mr McFarland may have questions, as I have, about how many more inquiries we will have.

Rest assured: there will probably be many more inquiries. I hope for Mr Morrow's sake and for all of our sakes that some day there will be some kind of truth in this country about what happened at La Mon, Teebane, Enniskillen and elsewhere.

All of us who have read 'Lost Lives' by McKittrick, Kelters, Feeney and Thornton might be able to establish things that we did not know before. Until I

read that book, I did not know that a close friend of mine was tortured before he was murdered in 1974, at exactly the same time as those bombings took place. That was a little bit of truth of which I was unaware. Can we imagine what it must have been like for that person's mother to read that for the first time? That is what inquiries attempt to do. So many questions remain unanswered that the families, many of whom will be listening to this debate, simply want to know what happened and why.

If there are questions about why the Garda Síochána investigation concluded early, Mr Justice Henry Barron should answer them. If there are questions about the technical capacity of the paramilitaries to carry out the bombings, some of the files might answer them. What was the level, or lack, of co-operation between the Garda Síochána and the then RUC? Was there penetration? That would not be surprising after 30 years of the troubles in Northern Ireland. In order to gather intelligence from those operating against one's police force, does one not try to infiltrate and penetrate in order to understand them better than they understand themselves? That is what I understand to be a line of military intelligence gathering. Do we not want to ask those questions and always have them answered? The difference is that we expect standards from those in charge of law and order that we might never expect from paramilitaries.

The inquiry is in place, and all that is being asked for is a full and truthful disclosure, and, it is to be hoped, some consistency. I have worked with victims' organisations such as Families Acting for Innocent Relatives (FAIR), Families Against Crime by Terrorism (FACT) and others. Let no one be under any illusion that they do not disparage the word "truth" any more than the families of the forgotten do. What unites them is that they want disclosure, and they want some truth.

In order to protect ourselves from perpetrators, we have to have retribution. However, in a conflict resolution situation, there must also be some restoration of justice. The least that we can do is give those families a little bit of that.

In this Building last week, pupils from Lagan College presented a play by Paul Goetzee, 'The Pilgrimage', in which he wrote that

"Peace is a foreign country when war has been your home for far too long."

Perhaps all that we can do in the Assembly today is vote to give those families a little bit of peace in their lives.

5.00 pm

Question put.

The Assembly proceeded to a Division.

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What is the ruling when it is obvious that the minority of Assembly Members, in answer to your question, say “No”?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Kelly, you know the rules of the Chamber — I hope as well as I do.

Mr J Kelly: Well perhaps you could explain them to us.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Kelly, I advise you not to be discourteous to the Chair.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 26; Noes 18

AYES

Alex Attwood, Joe Byrne, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, David Ford, Tommy Gallagher, Carmel Hanna, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Kieran McCarthy, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Monica McWilliams, Jane Morrice, Conor Murphy, Mary Nelis, Danny O'Connor, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Brid Rodgers, John Tierney.

NOES

Billy Bell, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Tom Hamilton, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, James Leslie, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Ken Robinson, Mark Robinson, George Savage, Jim Shannon, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the UK Government to expedite, as agreed, their provision of all relevant documents and files to the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the 1974 Dublin and Monaghan bombings, which is chaired by the former Irish Supreme Court Judge, Henry Barron.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Motion made

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Madam Deputy Speaker.]

CLOSURE OF FACTORIES IN LISNASKEA

Mr Gallagher: The issues of unemployment and job losses have been discussed in the Chamber before; they will be revisited today. In the constituencies in the west of the Province, unemployment levels are persistently high.

Lisnaskea is the second largest town in Fermanagh; it has a population of 3,500. In the past three years the town has suffered major job losses — there were 70 redundancies when the Adria factory closed, 80 jobs were lost when Fermanagh Creameries shut down, and 196 were lost when the Sir Richard Arkwright textile factory finally closed in July 2001. The loss of those 350 jobs has resulted in hardships for the employees involved, their families and other local people.

Belfast has a population of 352,700. Can Members imagine what would be the impact upon Belfast of 35,270 job losses — one-tenth of the city's population — over a three-year period? The job losses in Lisnaskea were a severe blow to the town and to the wider Fermanagh community. The wages of employees at the Sir Richard Arkwright factory contributed some £2 million to the local economy each year. In the aftermath of the closures, there were promises of renewed efforts to secure more inward investment to the area. To date, however, there has been no breakthrough in that regard. Those who were made redundant were given some support in the form of help to relocate and retrain. Some were able to find work elsewhere, although many of those jobs were located outside the Lisnaskea area and some were situated across the border.

The unfavourable exchange rate disadvantages those who work in the South but live in Fermanagh and pay their bills and mortgage in sterling. For several years the difference in the exchange rate has created a downward trend in cross-border trade in towns such as Lisnaskea. The effects of that have now been compounded by the job losses.

A more hopeful sign has been the resolute action and attitude of the local community. The local development association has put in place a strategic plan to help small local businesses to grow. It has built small business units, all of which are already occupied. There is a demand for extra workspace, and at least one of the present tenants of one of those units is ready to move to larger premises and to increase his

workforce. Conveniently located land is available for that purpose, and locals are formulating a plan to help to finance further developments. Their aim is to retain expanding business in the area and to increase employment. As we know, increased employment, in turn, will bring greater social and economic benefits for that hard-pressed area.

5.15 pm

That is one example of the approach referred to by the Minister, Sir Reg Empey, at the time. I note that he is present for the debate. He referred to the development of local business as one way of countering the blows of factory closures in the Fermanagh area. Locally-owned, home-grown businesses are a success story in Fermanagh. However, indigenous industry must be nurtured by Government agencies. Therefore, I call upon the relevant agencies to give assistance to local development initiatives and to facilitate expanding businesses at Lisnaskea so that they can bring their plans to fruition.

We want inward investment in the area, and we are entitled to a level playing field when competing with other areas in Northern Ireland to attract new jobs. The area suffers from some disadvantages. For example, it is far from the bigger airports, and its roads are in a poor state. I repeat my demand that the Department for Regional Development includes the upgrading of Fermanagh roads in its plan. In response to a recent question in the House, the Minister for Regional Development, Mr P Robinson, said that it would help Fermanagh if the roads in neighbouring counties were upgraded. The people of Fermanagh will not be fobbed off with that suggestion. We want the roads in our county to be upgraded so that we have a level playing field for attracting inward investment and helping local businesses.

When the job losses occurred at Lisnaskea last summer, there was a great outpouring of concern about the situation. We must remember that the employees who lost their jobs and their families are living with the consequences. Hence, I proposed this debate, and I ask that the creation of jobs in the area be given all the attention and support that it deserves.

Mr Morrow: It is appropriate that the Assembly should discuss this matter at this time, and I thank Mr Gallagher for bringing it to our attention. About 18 months ago, people living in Fermanagh and south Tyrone read headlines in the local papers, such as, "135 Jobs lost in Desmonds closure"; "Staggering loss to Employees" at the closure of Unipork and "Shock turns to anger for cheesemakers out of a job" when a cheese factory announced its closure.

When the Lisnaskea factory closed, I contacted the Minister, Sir Reg Empey. I was impressed by his hands-on approach and his willingness to do all that he could to try to avert the job losses and create better

prospects for the future. I attribute no blame to him whatsoever for his best endeavours. It is right that Members should acknowledge that he is present in the House today. He has again shown that he does not take these matters lightly but wants to adopt a hands-on approach.

At that time, around 18 months ago, when there seemed to be a catalogue of announcements, Sir Reg Empey said that the Malton's closure was another regrettable setback for Fermanagh, one of the regions where the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and its agencies were focusing initiatives to strengthen employment. I look forward to hearing how the Minister has advanced those initiatives since then. It would be appropriate for the Minister to tell the House what the future strategy is for areas like County Fermanagh. We are entitled to be treated like any other part of Northern Ireland. We could be forgiven at times for thinking that we are not treated that way. We will let others be the judge of that.

County Fermanagh is an area of high unemployment. Unless we get investment quickly we could be in a very bad situation. The people of Fermanagh, in areas such as Lisnaskea, are innovative and have made honest endeavours to do things and to stimulate their area. They cannot do it without the support of the Minister and his Department. I call on the Minister to take a particular interest in County Fermanagh and the Lisnaskea area and for his Department to come up with a strategic plan that will directly tackle the recent job losses and, more importantly, stem the flow of redundancies that have come in a glut recently.

I also ask the Minister if he is prepared to consider County Fermanagh for high-tech jobs. Fermanagh suffers more from the lack of that type of investment than any other region in Northern Ireland. I would like to direct the Minister's attention to that particular type of work to ensure that the job losses do not continue in the days ahead. A proper infrastructure and a strategic plan are needed. I hope that the new Invest Northern Ireland board will divert some of its energy and money to tackling the chronic problem.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Gallagher for raising this matter nearly a year after the job losses occurred. Not much has changed for those who found themselves out of work in Fermanagh — Lisnaskea in particular, where almost half the total jobs were lost. I have looked at the figures relating to the factories that were closed. We all know which factories lost out. One of the worst cases was Fermanagh Creameries. Food production was something I considered to be fairly high-tech, given the quality of the machinery that was in that factory. I believe that it could have been continued. However, that is not the Minister's fault, or indeed anyone's fault. It is one of the things that happen. Members have no

say or control over them. However, we must deal with them when trying to represent our areas.

It was a perfectly good factory, which could have produced for years to come. It is now lying idle. Most of its machinery is dilapidated and can no longer work.

Agricultural businesses outnumber other businesses in the county. Although agriculture is important, it is also a weakness because of the great dependence on it. Farming, for example, is an industry in the doldrums. It is difficult to see a future for farming or a way out of the present situation despite the 'Vision for the Future of the Agri-food Industry' report from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Of all registered businesses in Fermanagh, 58% are agricultural; the figure for the Six Counties as a whole is 33%. That highlights the area's rurality and the importance of farming to its economy.

Unemployment figures from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in 2001 show that 1,767 people were unemployed in Fermanagh: 1,264 male and 503 female. That gives an idea of the effect of job losses on those who expect to find work in the area.

All job losses have dramatically affected the people of Fermanagh. Such job losses are unacceptable. However, it is even more unacceptable to be told that the situation is improving because the number of people claiming jobseeker's allowance is decreasing. It is not mentioned that the number is decreasing because people are being siphoned off into training schemes, forced to claim other benefits or entering part-time or temporary employment with lower wages.

A recent study by consultants for Fermanagh Economic Task Force highlighted a labour force reserve of 2,829, compared with a Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment jobless total of 1,766. The Department's figures do not include those who are not claiming benefit because they work in a temporary or low-paid job, are unemployed, or are unemployed farmers. In addition, unemployment in the farming community is high and continues to undermine our economy's ability to grow. There is a considerable difference in those figures, which the Minister can perhaps explain.

It is clear that the peripherality of Fermanagh means that the area requires disproportionately more IDB investment and support to attract and retain inward investment and to develop local indigenous businesses — possibly more than anywhere else. IDB assistance in Fermanagh between 1996 and 2000 was 5% of the Northern Irish total. However, only 2.5% of the jobs that were promoted and safeguarded by the IDB were in Fermanagh.

A recent Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment labour market bulletin recognised that districts in the west, among them Fermanagh and Tyrone, showed

the highest concentration of long-term unemployment. In several districts, over 34% of the workforce were long-term unemployed. In Fermanagh, the figure was 38%, while the figures for Derry and Omagh were both 34%.

LEDU has had an impact on the small business sector with its business start programme. Of the 149 people in Fermanagh who completed the programme, 86 went on to start their own businesses — almost double the Northern Irish average. There is a significantly higher percentage of small business starts in Fermanagh in comparison with Northern Ireland as a whole, which proves that starting and establishing small businesses is one of Fermanagh's strengths rather than attracting larger businesses, as the area does not have a large pool of workers.

Between 1995 and 1999, tourism ranked as the fourth highest generator of money in the local economy. The TSN programme of action is obviously one of the areas of greatest need. The 'Measures of Deprivation in Northern Ireland' report by Dr Mike Noble is significant. Perhaps the Minister and other Departments can look at how that will affect Fermanagh.

5.30 pm

If all Departments follow suit, the figures show that among the voluntary agencies — even in health — anyone doing anything in Fermanagh is obviously at a disadvantage. The Noble index is unfair, as opposed to our position on the Robson indicator. We are losing a considerable amount of money. The local strategy partnership (LSP) may operate in respect of some of the new money for the new rural programme, and that impact will continue. I do not know what we can do about it, but the impact on Fermanagh will be severe in comparison to that on other areas, including urban areas.

The current population of Fermanagh is 57,000. That will rise to almost 59,000 by 2003 and to 60,000 by 2008. The population of working age will rise from 33,500 to 37,000 by 2008. Therefore, more people will be available either to look for work or to fill jobs provided by outside bodies. The Robson and Noble indicators will be significant, and that is worrying unless figures can be produced to show something different.

Of the 45 Noble indicators, seven domain deprivation measures are combined to produce one overall multiple measure, with income weighted at 25%, employment at 25%, health and disability at 15%, education, skills and training at 15%, geographical access at 10% and social environment and housing at 5%. Seventeen per cent of our housing is unfit. The ranking is very low for something so important, and Fermanagh will fare badly as a result.

Fermanagh's strength is, as I mentioned earlier, in the small business sector. We have several small but

considerable businesses that survive on their own. Whatever profits they make are returned to the business. Through the rural programme, we probably need to start up more small businesses in small villages to provide off-farm jobs. That has been done successfully in parts of County Monaghan.

Our difficulty is that planning policy statement (PPS) 7 permits no commercial development in the countryside. Most of Fermanagh's villages have no zoned areas for development, and that creates a problem for people who have to travel from places such as Rosslea to Enniskillen to start up a business. They are forced to pay for space that they cannot afford, when quite often they would prefer to start a small business in their own back yards or on their own bits of property. Many of our businesses started that way.

That has not been dealt with. Planning continues to be a severe difficulty for us, and it will continue to be so, even in the new rural development programme. It is for those Departments and Ministers to examine that matter and see what can be done; otherwise the new programmes will be a waste of time.

Businesses are more easily started across the border. There is more incentive from the Industrial Development Agency (IDA). Our problems seem to be greater. More business is permitted in rural areas, and that must change. We must encourage investors, together with small- and medium-sized businesses, into all areas. Small business managers must be persuaded of the benefits of staff training versus looking for capital handouts. That is often their chosen route, and it can be bad value for money. It should be explained to them that training their staff in marketing would gain them more.

The aggregates tax is obviously going to put us in an uncompetitive position. Construction is one of our strengths in Fermanagh, and it is a growth industry. It will become uncompetitive with the introduction of the aggregates tax, and I welcome the stay of execution on that.

Fermanagh and, perhaps, Derry also are without broadband services, information and communication technology (ICT) and the superhighway. Other areas have those facilities. I mentioned the matter to British Telecom officials during a recent presentation, and its representatives said that they would look at that in greater detail. However, it puts Fermanagh at a competitive disadvantage when compared to other areas such as Letterkenny. Those services are important to education, and participation in the ICT industry is something that Fermanagh could gain from.

If my figures are correct, then, according to the Noble report, Fermanagh needs to benefit from rural proofing. That is why we have been arguing for rural proofing of the various departmental policies and the effect they have on rural areas.

The Hayes Report raises other issues, and its implementation would make a big difference to a county that is in dire need of jobs. The Erne Hospital is one of the area's largest employers and one of our greatest strengths, and we are hoping against hope for success there.

The report from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's vision group can also give benefits. The Executive will need to support their implementation by providing the necessary resources. Without those resources, much of the proposed rural programme will not happen. Agriculture faces a difficult future. Those developments may deliver local jobs, and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and others, should consider them.

I thank the Minister for his consideration of the jobs situation. The job losses that occurred were not his fault, and he was not in a position to do much to prevent them. He did his best, and he worked with everyone, including myself, to try to do everything possible for the people who lost their jobs. Many of those people have had to travel to firms such as Quinn's, to places across the border and to other areas in search of jobs. Even though some of them have found employment, the fact remains that they have had to travel away from Lisnaskea. That shows that if local jobs were available, the people would be there to do them. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I welcome the opportunity to respond. The reasons for the debate are apparent, and they have been eloquently addressed by the Members who have spoken.

The substantial reduction in jobs, associated with the closures that have been referred to, is regrettable. However, as Members have accepted, the decisions to cut jobs were taken by the individual companies involved for their own reasons. I do not need to remind anyone of the difficulties that the food-processing and textile sectors in Northern Ireland have faced recently. Lisnaskea and the wider Fermanagh area have not been alone in suffering the effects of changes in the market place.

However, we have been taking action to try to halt the decline in those traditional sectors and to encourage them to become more competitive. Many of the jobs lost were in the textile industry. The Kurt Salmon Associates (KSA) report that we commissioned, and which was published last year, is a clear example of how Government and industry have worked together to identify a way forward for the sector.

There were five themes for sustainable growth in the sector — focusing on branded products; applying e-business and knowledge techniques; the development of strategic alliances between suppliers, customers and

centres of excellence; the development of more balanced sourcing of portfolios that include offshore suppliers; and the development of unique and desirable products.

As part of the recommendations of that report, a new industry-led company called Catalyst was established in December 2001. It will provide strong leadership for the sector and continue the work of the report's implementation team. The IDB will continue to work closely with the sector bodies and individual companies to ensure that the momentum that was built up following the publication of the KSA report is not lost. I wanted to mention that, because some people believe that we have given up on the textile sector. That is not true — it is still a significant employer in Northern Ireland and is well ahead of the national average. Between 13,000 and 14,000 people are employed by the industry, so it is a significant sector by any standards. That does not compensate those in the Fermanagh area who have suffered. Nor does it compensate others in that sector, in areas such as County Antrim and County Down, who find themselves under threat. That sector has been under continuous threat over the past decade.

Work is continuing to replace the jobs lost in Lisnaskea and elsewhere in County Fermanagh. One way of doing that is to attract inward investment. I understand Fermanagh's concerns that it has not had its fair share of new inward investment in recent years. There has been a significant number of visits to the county. In the last three years, there have been 13 inward investment visits to County Fermanagh. The IDB continues to encourage people to establish businesses there. Telecom and network service sectors have provided the bulk of new inward investment in Northern Ireland. It has been hard to encourage many of those businesses to establish in areas west of the River Bann. County Fermanagh is no exception, but we continue to try. However, despite the fact that the companies are offered incentives to locate in New TSN areas, they have concluded that a large critical mass of skilled people within a limited travel-to-work area is required for their types of business, and it has been difficult to encourage them to establish in certain areas.

The IDB has been working closely with others, particularly with council and community representatives, to establish how we can best market and promote the area to do our best for inward investors. At the end of the day, it is they who make the final decisions.

We have also been collaborating with LEDU on the council-led economic task force, which was established in March 2001 following job losses. The task force has been very important. It comprises representatives from all Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment agencies, the council and the local community. It is a good example of how local people can respond, and we are ready to help that task force in any way that we can.

Inward investment is not the only solution. Most jobs in Northern Ireland are created by indigenous companies rather than by inward investment. Much has been done to stimulate and help the development of local businesses, enabling them to become more internationally competitive. One of the key priorities identified by the economic task force was the need to support small local businesses to identify and develop potential for growth. To this end, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has offered financial assistance for the establishment of the Fermanagh growth programme, which is directed specifically at small businesses.

Many companies from the area have participated on international-led trade activities, such as trade missions, trade development visits and exhibitions. They have also made use of tailor-made consultancy from trade advisors in the Middle-Eastern, European and Asian markets. Competitive assessment and improvement methods are also offered to companies in the area, and several have availed of these services. In addition, the IDB's e-business service helps prepare traditional manufacturing companies to participate in the digital economy by using information and communications technology to protect and enhance their profitability and achieve sustainable growth. Some forward-looking companies have recognised the importance of this and have made use of the service.

Not all has been doom and gloom in the county. While this debate focuses on Lisnaskea, it must be emphasised that there are job opportunities in the wider area. For instance, in December 2000, I was privileged to announce the £2.5 million investment by Belleek Pottery, at a time when traditional companies were under pressure.

5.45 pm

So far, that has resulted in the creation of 30 of the 50 jobs that were promised, and I hope to see the speedy conclusion of that expansion. Rye Valley Foods in Enniskillen is another success story: it is investing almost £14 million at its plant, which will ultimately create 130 new jobs in the manufacture of frozen prepared meals for the Irish, British and European retail food service markets.

LEDU also remains active in supporting local industry in the Lisnaskea and Fermanagh area. For example, LEDU has represented my Department on the task force and on the Into the West and Innovation West initiatives. Last year LEDU organised a business growth seminar at which it presented a range of support services available to clients and at which the Fermanagh growth programme was launched. The LEDU western area regional action plan aims to ensure that all small indigenous businesses located within disadvantaged areas of Fermanagh and Tyrone

are afforded the opportunity to participate in a range of business development programmes.

Raw unemployment statistics are only one indicator of unemployment levels. Members have pointed out that other issues are involved and that raw statistics cannot be taken on a stand-alone basis. However, they are not insignificant. According to the last set of figures that I have available, some 1,670 people are currently registered on the claimant count. That figure is 100 fewer than Mr McHugh's figure.

This year's pattern has similar highs and lows to last year's. Last August unemployment rose to about 1,900, largely due to the closure of the Sir Richard Arkwright textile factory and the effects of other previously announced redundancies. However, that figure is still marginally below the figure for the same period in the previous year. The subsequent figures show that that pattern is continuing: unemployment is now slightly lower now than it was last year, with a difference of approximately 123. I acknowledge that it is a blunt instrument and that those figures must be viewed alongside other issues. It is true that some people may have moved on to claim other benefits or not sought re-employment. However, many people who lost their jobs last summer have managed to find themselves relocated, many of them in the Enniskillen area. Ironically, several companies complained to me that they could not attract labour and were having difficulties recruiting staff.

So there has been some displacement, and I do not doubt the validity of Members' anecdotal evidence about people having to find jobs across the border and so forth. However, it has not been all negative, because some people have started their own businesses, having been counselled when they were made redundant. Admittedly, that number may not be large; nevertheless, it is significant as it shows that people have taken the opportunity to move on on their own.

As regards LEDU, if all goes well, we expect approximately five projects to be announced between now and the end of the financial year. Those five projects will create approximately 34 jobs. Although I cannot be specific at this stage, the IDB is negotiating with some companies in the county, and I hope to be able to make some announcements before the end of the financial year. However, on the whole, the small business sector in the county is one of the most vibrant in the west of the Province.

Many people there are actively promoting, expanding and starting businesses. The county is taking up a disproportionate share of the available resources in the west of the Province because there is a good core of businesses there. Clearly, there are people in the county who are anxious to progress. There is leadership from the council, and now a new basis and good analysis in the recent Quinn report. I am hopeful that this will

send out a message that, despite all the difficulties, the county still has a vibrant, viable small business sector. Indeed, it is clearly growing, as I have outlined, with the projects that we hope to announce between now and the end of the financial year, and I see no reason why this should not continue.

However, I am aware of the underlying fragility in certain areas. There is disproportionately high dependence on agriculture, and we all know that there are clear difficulties there — difficulties that apply right across the Province and further afield. Those difficulties do not often show up in unemployment statistics. Often self-employed farmers have to take a second job, and they do not necessarily show up as unemployed. At the same time, however, there is a reduction in earnings and therefore less money in the economy.

Foot-and-mouth disease had a disproportionate effect on two of County Fermanagh's stable industries — tourism and agriculture. There is no doubt that our tourism industry has not yet fully felt the effects of 11 September; there is a long way to go. We know from experience in the Gulf war that it took three to four years for the transatlantic tourist traffic to return to pre-war figures. I see no reason to believe that we shall not face similar time scales. Tourism is re-focusing its emphasis on the European and Great Britain markets to compensate for the shortfall, and, of course, a major drive will be made in the Republic to encourage more visitors. Those areas will be targeted to supplement some of the anticipated losses from long-distance destinations.

I am concerned that we are talking down the economy of County Fermanagh — almost implying that it is on its knees. It is not on its knees. It has suffered a bad period in its history with these losses. However, I am hopeful, as the county has a good community spirit. Many good voluntary organisations are working in close co-operation with the council and the statutory bodies, and there is co-operation between the statutory bodies, which is absolutely critical. Indeed, County Fermanagh is one of the leading examples of this co-operation in Northern Ireland. It is happening at a structured level. Resources are being put into it, and the council is taking a major lead. There is civic leadership in the area to justify support.

There is also a strong small business sector, which we sometimes underestimate. The announcement of one or two extra jobs somewhere in the country does not necessarily make the headlines. The media gives disproportionate coverage to closures, and I have watched this closely over the last couple of years. If one tries to get a good news story on the economy into the press, one may or may not succeed.

The announcement of a closure will have no trouble whatsoever in achieving headlines. However, it will

have a detrimental effect on our ability to give confidence to the business community in the county. People who wish to invest money need to have confidence. They are aware of what is going on around them, so if they hear stories of doom and gloom, they are less likely to invest.

Another key issue that was raised during the debate was planning, and my Colleague, the Minister of the Environment, is in the Chamber.

There is a tug of war between the desire to help small businesses to locate in rural areas and the desire to protect the environment, and permanent tension exists between those two objectives. Many people would not want to see ad-hoc or willy-nilly development in rural areas, because that would spoil one of County Fermanagh's key assets — its beauty. Indeed, that county has a collection of some of the most beautiful landscapes anywhere, and nobody would wish to see that destroyed. Therefore, the Department of the Environment has a huge task in trying to balance the protection of the environment with allowing the economy to grow. We must continue to discuss those tensions, which are reflected in the local community, the district council, communities in the wider county and elsewhere in rural Northern Ireland, because we want to protect our heritage and the environment. However, at the same time, we do not want to stifle economic development.

The tension is reflected throughout the community. It does not have any party political issues attached to it; it is purely a matter of how we see our future. My Department is interested in the matter, but we must be aware of that tension, and we do not want to destroy our heritage. We want to pass on an environment of which our successors can be proud.

Another closely related issue is land and the provision of sites. That has been a live issue in Lisnaskea in particular.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I remind the Minister that thanks to the family-friendly Standing Orders, our cut-off point is 6.00 pm.

Sir Reg Empey: I wish to close on the issue of the land. We are negotiating with economic development people in Lisnaskea and await their proposals. I am hopeful that we can achieve a way forward. We are also looking closely at other projects in the county, which could ensure access to sites for industrial development. We want to encourage such development, because Lisnaskea has an excellent record. With several sources of funding, there is the potential to achieve a satisfactory outcome especially given Lisnaskea's track record of success.

I want Members to be aware that we are far from complacent. I thank Mr Morrow for his comments, but I regret that some of the communications concerned negative news. Nevertheless, the county has much going for it. It is beautiful; it has immense potential in the European Union for expansion of its tourism sector. However, people do not want to sit in a museum. They want to be active participants. They want to see businesses that can provide employment so that their children do not have to leave. Our agencies and Invest Northern Ireland, when that is established in the spring, are determined not to take their eye off the ball in County Fermanagh, and I certainly hope to visit the area in the near future.

Adjourned at 5.59 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 22 January 2002

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

DECEMBER MONITORING

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the December monitoring round.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): On behalf of the Executive, I wish to make a statement on public spending allocations in 2001-02 following the December monitoring round.

At their meeting on 18 January 2002, the Executive decided on some reallocations of expenditure for the short time that remains in the financial year. Those reallocations make use of the resources available from changes in the estimated requirements of Departments that emerged in the December monitoring round.

The Programme for Government has guided our prioritisation of the allocations. Inevitably at this late stage of the year, however, our focus has been on making necessary changes to estimated requirements and fine-tuning allocations, rather than on any policy changes or new priorities.

The December monitoring round completes the process of considering what revisions might be necessary or desirable to amend Estimates provision in the current year. The process for the passage of the first Budget Bill, which addresses the spring Supplementary Estimates for all Departments, must begin now.

This monitoring round is governed by the timetable for the first Budget Bill, which is tight every year. All the stages of Assembly consideration of the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Budget Bill must be completed in time to secure Royal Assent before the end of the financial year, yet we cannot realistically begin this process any earlier than mid-December, as we must take account of the latest information on spending plans from Departments.

Some reallocations are possible later through the February monitoring round, but those are constrained by the ceilings set in the Estimates, which rule out any

large-scale switches between Departments. Therefore the issues addressed in this monitoring round will be the last that can be reflected in Supplementary Estimates for this financial year.

The amount available for reallocation is £73 million. Once again there are several reasons for the amount's being so high at this stage of the financial year. We would normally expect to have a substantial amount, but several factors have yielded substantial resources for reallocation now.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development surrendered £12.5 million primarily because of the impact of the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak, which disrupted planned activity and delayed the obtaining of European Union approval for certain programmes.

The Department of Education needs £13 million less than planned for threshold payments to teachers following the teachers' pay settlement agreed last January. Against this reduction in the estimated accruals cost of the threshold payments, the Department will face a pressure of £5.5 million in 2002-03, and I will return to that later.

The Department of Employment and Learning identified several easements amounting to £12.7 million, most notably in its New Deal and Jobskills programmes.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment can surrender a net £8.6 million from industrial development grants and capital receipts after allowing for the reallocation of funds to meet a number of inescapable contractual obligations in other aspects of assistance to industry.

Elsewhere several Departments have identified a range of additional receipts from fees and charges and disposal of assets.

Before I refer to the bids received, I will point out issues affecting 2002-03, as they relate to the approach the Executive have agreed for this monitoring round.

The revised Budget for 2002-03 was constructed on the basis that we could, without undue risk, allocate some £40 million of spending power for planned carry-forward into 2002-03 from anticipated underspending this year and also set aside £8 million of that anticipated underspending to meet urgent pressures in the Health Service. This latter allocation to health is shown in the table of allocations in the annex to my statement, as it has to be funded from the spending power available now.

In proposing this approach in September, my predecessor, Mark Durkan, made it clear that it would be possible to manage resources in the September and December monitoring rounds, and also during 2002-03, and to make good these assumptions. I am pleased to report that we are now in a position to confirm this by adding £5.7 million from the resources now available to us to the £21.3 million we set aside in the September

round. This leaves a balance of £13 million to be found in the February monitoring round.

In taking this approach, the Executive have considered carefully the need to address positively the difficulties which the Health Service is currently facing.

However, we also need to be realistic about the amount that can be spent in this financial year. In other words, we need to strike a balance between ensuring that we are responding to immediate problems in the short term and making sure that our longer-term spending plans for next year are properly resourced.

Departments lodged bids for additional resources in this monitoring round totalling over £98 million. The majority of those bids represent changes in estimates of requirements since the Budget for 2001-02 was approved in December 2000. Some have arisen from the need to address new cost pressures. It is not surprising that the bids are smaller than would be the case at other stages, given that there are only a few months remaining in this year.

Given the substantial amounts available, the Executive have decided to meet a very large proportion of these bids, amounting to some £59 million. Together with the £8 million already allocated to health and the £5.7 million needed to complete the planned carry-over for 2002-03, they account for the total resources of £73 million available.

I will say a little about the additional allocations for each Department. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will receive an additional £9.8 million, £7.1 million of which is to meet the additional costs of compensation allowances arising from animal disease, mainly brucellosis and tuberculosis. Provision has also been made for some further costs arising from the foot-and-mouth disease crisis and BSE.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will receive funding to assist smaller museums and will retain receipts from the sale of some surplus property to undertake pressing maintenance work within the public library estate.

In the September monitoring round, Mark Durkan announced that the Executive had agreed to set aside £1.9 million for the deficit in funding for the Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI), subject to an examination of the circumstances and factors which gave rise to this deficit. The sum of £1.1 million represents an accumulated deficit in recurrent funding, and the Executive have agreed to confirm the allocation of resources to that, subject to MAGNI and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure agreeing a recovery plan with my Department and the Economic Policy Unit in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to secure cost savings and greater financial stability. This could involve re-examining the scope

for rationalisation and centralisation of support services to see if the economies assumed when the merger of the three previous organisations was approved will be realised.

The balance of £0.8 million is needed for maintenance work at the museums. The Executive have agreed that we should confirm £0.5 million of this because some of the work needed is health and safety related and particularly urgent. However, the balance of £0.3 million will now be used for other purposes and has been taken into account in the allocations I am announcing today.

The Department of Education is receiving funding for the education element of the north Belfast initiative. This will address the needs of schools and young people in north Belfast and help rebuild community relations. The Youth Service is also receiving funding, primarily to address health and safety issues and to meet urgent equipment needs.

10.45 am

As I said earlier, the Department of Education has also bid for £5.5 million to enable the cost of threshold payments to teachers to be fully met in 2002-03. It has surrendered £13 million in the current year in respect of the same payments. This is largely a technical issue, and we have agreed that it is not necessary to set aside money for this purpose now as there is time for this to be covered from the February monitoring round or from routine end-year flexibility. However, to enable the Department to plan on a firm basis, we have given a commitment that funding for these payments will be allocated in 2002-03. This is a further example of how we are ensuring that in-year resources are being targeted at current priorities and pressures and minimising the amount of planned carry-over into next year.

The Department for Employment and Learning is receiving an allocation of £3.3 million. This will be used mainly to meet the needs of the learndirect network following the closure of individual learning accounts. It will also provide an advance grant to the Lisburn Institute to overcome difficulties there.

The Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU), in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is being provided with £2 million to meet projected client claims and fund two new programmes. Elsewhere, the Department is reallocating funding originally provided for industrial development grants to assist industry in other areas where some inescapable contractual obligations have arisen due partly to the world economic recession and the impact of 11 September.

There is also an allocation for the Department of Finance and Personnel to cover the initial procurement and implementation costs of accounting systems to support a common approach to the provision of

accounting services across all Departments. This will be more economical than developing separate systems for all 11 Departments.

The Executive have, as always, paid particular attention to Health Service needs, and they are acutely aware of the pressures which are causing such deep concern across the community. In recognition of that, we have decided to allocate £7.8 million primarily to meet cost pressures in health and personal social services. This allocation is in addition to the £8 million which we had already agreed to allocate to the Health Service and which Mark Durkan announced on 3 December when he presented the revised Budget for 2002-03 to the Assembly. Provision for that is now being made in this monitoring round. Taken together, these allocations will enable urgent medical equipment to be purchased by trusts, and they will meet costs arising from higher-than-planned levels of service activity, junior doctors' contracts and consultants' payments, as well as address pressures in pharmacies, laboratories and domiciliary care. They will also cover a shortfall in trusts' projected income from GP fundholders.

The funding will be of real and immediate benefit to those in need of treatment and care, but many people will ask why we are not doing more, especially when we have seen so vividly the scale of the problems being faced in some acute hospitals. At this late stage in the financial year only limited amounts of additional funding can usefully be directed towards addressing the most immediate pressures. The Executive have looked carefully at this and listened carefully to advice from the Minister, Ms de Brún. We need to understand better the reasons for the underlying problems in the Health Service, and we need to develop appropriate strategies to address them.

While we need to respond to the particular difficulties that we are now facing, we must also actively seek long-term solutions rather than quick fixes.

The Department of the Environment is being allocated funding to meet the costs of producing the Belfast metropolitan area plan. It has also been necessary to add £14 million to the Department for Regional Development's budget to meet a range of unavoidable cost pressures in public transport and in the Roads Service and the Water Service.

The Department for Social Development is being allocated £4.9 million to meet a range of pressures — most notably to cover a projected £3 million increase in applications for the special purchase of evacuated dwellings (SPED) scheme arising from recent increases in civil disturbances. This provides more tangible evidence of the financial and social cost, which is a direct consequence of the unrest that affects so many in our community.

These are costs that we must meet. However, I am sure that Members agree that it is deeply regrettable that we should have to do so when there are so many pressing needs in our public services, especially in health, education and transport. To complete the allocations, an additional £0.4 million is being provided to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

As I explained earlier, these allocations largely represent the fine-tuning of estimated requirements across Departments. They are routine reallocations of spending power to move resources from where they are no longer needed, or cannot now be spent, to the emerging pressure points across departmental budgets.

I would like to raise another issue. Several Departments submitted bids in this monitoring round — totalling more than £4.5 million — for interim funding of projects that will be seeking funding from the Peace II programme. To ensure that Departments had some latitude in judging what would and would not succeed under Peace II, the Executive had previously agreed to set aside £2 million from the Social Inclusion /Community Regeneration Executive programme fund to cover any costs that were met in good faith, but which in the end proved not to be recoverable from the Peace II programme.

However, Departments are now seeking resources over and above the £2 million currently available, which would be needed only if it transpires that the commitments they have made are not successful under Peace II. These bids are being carefully assessed to determine how much is likely to be required from our own Budget. However, the position is not clear at present, and the Executive have concluded that it would be prudent to make further provision to cover projects that have been funded by Departments in good faith, but which may not be funded under Peace II. Therefore we have set aside a further £2 million from the Social Inclusion/Community Regeneration Executive programme fund for that purpose. This will leave much less for new projects from that fund in 2002-03.

We will be able to review the position when the gap funding issue has been concluded and Peace II is fully operational. In agreeing this provision, I emphasise that Departments will receive allocations for gap funding only if they can show that the projects could reasonably have been expected to succeed under Peace II; this is not an open door for bids for general support to the voluntary sector.

I recognise that some projects will no longer receive funding. Those projects will have to seek financial support from other sources. Indeed, it was made clear under Peace I that projects should be one-off, stand-alone projects or that they should develop an appropriate exit strategy. Through the introduction of gap funding, the Executive have made every effort to smooth the

transition to Peace II funding and provide a soft landing for projects that are not successful in receiving funding from Peace II. Future calls for funding will now have to be handled through the usual channels.

This monitoring round has provided some significant adjustments to expenditure patterns in this financial year. I stress that these are mainly routine adjustments, driven by revised estimates of requirements up, down and across a wide range of services. Members will ask why this round has continued the recent trend by yielding a large, though welcome, amount of room for manoeuvre. I expect the Assembly to question the effectiveness of our financial planning and estimating and to raise concerns about the level of resources being surrendered at a time when so many public services are facing real problems.

The Executive share this concern and have agreed that some analysis should be made to identify whether there are any underlying causes for this pattern of underspending. With the benefit of that analysis, we will consider how best to address those underlying causes as we set spending plans for the period 2003-04 to 2005-06 later this year.

We must seek to improve our planning and estimating. It would also be desirable, and generally welcome, for Departments to have firm, longer-term spending allocations, which would enable pressures to be more easily addressed through effective management and re-prioritisation of resources.

As a first step we need to ensure that our resources are allocated to the areas of greatest need, and we will be seeking to make further progress towards that goal in the forthcoming spending review. Our work on needs and effectiveness will be one element that will help to inform that process. The views of the Assembly and its Committees will also be an important influence on our thinking. However, we must be under no illusion: this will be an extremely challenging task, but one which we must address together if we are to fulfil our commitments and meet the expectations of the wider community.

In conclusion, the allocations I am announcing today on behalf of the Executive will provide real and immediate benefits to a wide range of our public services including health, education and transport. We have worked together to reach these decisions on the basis of a careful assessment of the most pressing priorities, and, in doing so, we have provided further evidence of our commitment to open, transparent and accountable Government.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement to the Assembly on this the first of his monitoring rounds. The statement reflects the concerns of the Committee

for Finance and Personnel about the extent of reallocations in each monitoring round, especially at this time of the year. Should priority areas such as health, education and transport not be receiving a larger proportion of the Budget, instead of so much going to some Departments that, subsequently, are not able to spend their allocations? If we are listening to the advice of Assembly and the Committees on priorities, the allocations should reflect that.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to the analysis of the trend. Can he give us a clear commitment before the next Budget round that the process will be examined in detail so that we can see some of the benefits coming through?

Are all these allocations being monitored with regard to TSN moneys? There are question marks over some of the allocations and how the Departments allocate TSN moneys.

11.00 am

Dr Farren: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for his remarks. I assure him, as I attempted to do in my statement, that the underspends and surrenders that he referred to will receive the analysis that I promised. No matter how precise our planning may become, it is unlikely that every Budget bid that is determined in December will be met 12 months later, according to the exact terms under which the finance was allocated. There may always be overspends and underspends.

Underspends are welcome, because they make available finance, which can be reallocated to meet emerging or immediate pressures. I trust that Members appreciate that. Nonetheless, the scale of the surrenders, at face value, raises questions that I have committed the Department to address. Planning will be more precise as a result of the co-operation of the Committees — particularly the Committee for Finance and Personnel, whose advice we value in that regard. However, I doubt that we will ever reach 100% accuracy in planning.

All Departments are obliged to ensure that their expenditure conforms to the framework requirement to target the social need that they have identified.

Mr Leslie: I welcome the Minister to his first monitoring round. I note from his remarks that, whereas he started with a surplus similar to that of the Durkan years, he intends to reduce it.

Further to his remarks about the need to examine our budgeting procedures to ensure that they are as stringent as possible, does the Minister agree that that will have a further implication for the Executive programme funds? When departmental budgets were first shaved to create the pool for the Executive programme funds, there were howls of anguish — particularly from the Benches to my right. However, the Departments have been able to implement their plans under the rearranged

budgets. That implies that the Executive programme funds have fitted comfortably into the scheme of things, and that they have provided a useful extra area of initiative for the Executive. Will the Minister comment on that? Alternatively, is he concerned that, in practice, the Departments have dipped back into the Executive programme funds to balance the books when their budgets have run short?

Dr Farren: As Members will appreciate, the Executive programme funds were established primarily to assist the development of new policies and programmes and to improve public services in accordance with the priorities that were agreed in the Programme for Government. Their aim is to help the Executive to break away from established patterns of spending and to develop local solutions to local problems that are cross-cutting, where possible. On the basis of that policy, which is echoed frequently inside and outside the Chamber, the Executive programme funds generally have been welcomed.

Last April, £146 million was allocated in the first monitoring round, which covered 62 projects. Several of the projects involved Departments working in partnership. In addition, £31 million was allocated for student support services. A further £39 million was announced in December. Several of those were cross-cutting proposals.

The Executive consider the programme funds to be an effective means of promoting cross-cutting work and supporting initiatives brought by a group of Ministers working together. The Executive have decided, at this early stage of their implementation, to carry out a short review of the existing arrangements in order to ensure that the funds are working to best effect in delivering the Executive's commitments and priorities. The review is in progress. Department of Finance and Personnel officials are due to appear before the Committee for Finance and Personnel on 29 January 2002 to discuss the review.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber on his first monitoring round. I acknowledge his efforts to ensure that those Departments that are most in need receive extra funding.

In his statement, the Minister indicated that the Department for Employment and Learning made a successful bid for £1 million to provide an advance grant to the Lisburn Institute of Further and Higher Education. Can the Minister outline the nature of that grant? Is he aware that the North West Institute of Further and Higher Education in Derry is facing financial pressures that threaten to disrupt its provision of community education services? Has a bid been made by the Department for Employment and Learning in respect of that institute?

Dr Farren: By the end of the financial year a deficit of around £1.1 million will have been created as a result of the running costs of the Lisburn Institute of

Further and Higher Education. The recovery plan designed to enable the institute to regain financial stability has been agreed with the Department for Employment and Learning. The grant will temporarily provide the resources that are needed to enable a plan to be implemented. The sum awarded will be recovered from the institute's grant in instalments over the next eight years.

I am aware of difficulties at the North West Institute of Further and Higher Education, as is my Colleague, the Minister for Employment and Learning. Her Department has commissioned consultants to ascertain the reason for the deficit. They will report by the beginning of February. The Department for Employment and Learning will not submit a bid to the Department of Finance and Personnel unless it is supported by a full recovery plan from the institute. In the meantime the Department is providing the means with which the institute can address its immediate cash flow situation by advancing its monthly grant. I assure the Member that the situation at the North West Institute of Further and Higher Education is being monitored carefully and a recovery plan is anticipated.

Mr Close: I welcome the Minister to his new position, and I welcome his presentation on the December monitoring round. In particular, I welcome the sweetening pill of the advance grant to the Lisburn Institute of Further and Higher Education. Does the Minister agree that the current monitoring round is a recognition of the Executive's failure to make proper estimates and to get their sums correct?

We have been operating for several years. In spite of that, something is seriously wrong, given that there is so much underspending while Departments remain under pressure to respond to the people's needs. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the health sector.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been allocated £7.8 million in this monitoring round. If health is supposed to be our number one priority, why has animal health been allocated virtually the same amount of money? Moreover, the Department for Regional Development has been allocated around £14 million. Does the Minister agree that health is not an emerging pressure, but one that has existed for several years?

Budgeting, monitoring and estimating are being carried out in entirely the wrong way, because we are in the same position, year in, year out. Allocations that are made as a "quick fix", represent money badly spent. The Executive must get their sums and estimations correct. As we move towards resource accounting, the situation can only get worse unless something is done urgently to correct it.

Dr Farren: I appreciate the Member's barbs that go with his good wishes on my appointment as Minister.

Health was at the core of Mr Close's points. I assure him that the bids made by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in this monitoring round have been met in full — *[Interruption]*.

Mr O'Connor: Hear, hear.

Dr Farren: Until I looked around, I was unsure of how to receive that note of acclaim, but I accept it in the spirit in which it was expressed.

We have met the Minister's bids. As I said, £8 million has been made available, in addition to the planned Budget allocations that my predecessor announced in December. Almost £16 million from the current monitoring round has been made available to health. Those moneys are designed to meet the pressures that are identified by that Department.

Seamus Close casts a keen eye over all budgeting announcements. I am sure that he is fully aware of the scale of additional investment that has been made in the health sector since devolution and that next year's health allocation will be almost 10% higher than the current year's allocation. We are aware of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's needs and are responding to them as they are identified.

Longer-term issues are being addressed as part of the Department's strategic approach. We await the requirements that will arise as a result of that, and we will respond to them accordingly. I addressed Mr Close's general point about the associated budgeting and planning in my response to the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

We are analysing the pattern of underspending. We must recognise that circumstances can give rise to unanticipated underspends. In the past year, for example, the foot-and-mouth crisis placed particular pressures in one direction. Certain programmes for which expenditure had been anticipated were either delayed or put back indefinitely as a result of the clampdown on agricultural activity that ensued from the outbreak of the disease.

11.15 am

Ms McWilliams: I too welcome the Minister to his new portfolio. I was taken aback by the large sum of money that we now surrender under the technical term "easements". I cannot understand how matters related to non-recurrent funding have come to be classed as "bids". I also declare my disappointment that over £3 million has been allocated to fund animal tuberculosis compensation, given the scandal that was pointed out by the Northern Ireland Audit Office that, to date, £21 million has been handed out in compensation. There are many questions on what is happening here.

I have serious questions about the information presented today for the first time in the section "Bids

Recommended". I am a member of two Assembly Committees, and I have not seen those bids until now. There may be an explanation for that. Under the heading "Centre" there is a recommended bid by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for Invest Northern Ireland and another by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for funding to provide medical equipment for trusts. That bid should have been scrutinised by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It should also have examined the £4.6 million bid for funding to meet hospital and community health pressures and the amount that it is planned to carry forward.

Much as I have tried, I see no explanation for those recommended bids. That is no way to run the Assembly. There may be some explanation, but Members saw those bids for the first time today, without having had any time to see the broader picture and understand the pressures involved.

I hope that some bids will be non-recurrent; for example, the bid for £3 million for the SPED scheme in respect of people who have been intimidated out of their homes. Let us hope that there will be no such bid in the next round.

I am concerned that the facility for Members' scrutiny of those bids leaves much to be desired.

Dr Farren: I thank the Member for her questions and comments. I did point out that at this time of year our timetable is tight, so all the scrutiny to which the Member suggests the Committees are entitled may not be possible. However, the Committees can always keep in touch with expenditure in their Departments. In that way they can make themselves aware of emerging pressures and underspends to enable them to forecast likely situations. The pressures communicated to us in mid-December emerged over time, not in the day or two before documents reached the Finance and Personnel Committee. The Executive Committees need to look carefully at how they address spending issues. They should seek from the Departments information in respect of anticipated underspends and emerging pressures throughout the year.

The timescale for December monitoring means that it is not possible to allow any more time. Perhaps we need to address that issue with the Committees to see if better use can be made of the time between the identification of the bids and the announcement of the decisions so that the information that the Member is seeking can be made more readily available. However, the period running up to the identification of bids and underspends must be looked at as well.

The allocation of £8 million to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was announced and approved in the Assembly in December 2001 as part of the Budget proposals.

Ms McWilliams: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I do not normally take points of order during questions on ministerial statements. However, I sensed from the Member's question that there was a query about the order and procedure of the Assembly. The proper context in which to take up the matter may be in discussions with the Chairperson of the Committee and myself, rather than with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. It may be that some of the Member's questions are about information from Departments to Committees, rather than from the Department of Finance and Personnel to Committees. If that was the point of order, and if the Member wishes to raise the question with me directly, I will be happy to consider it.

Ms McWilliams: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also welcome the Minister's first address on the monitoring rounds. He said that underspends are welcome. However, the lack of explanation as to why these underspends arise is unwelcome. Therefore, I am glad to hear that the Minister will examine the pattern of underspends and whether the forecasting systems are effective in determining how those occur.

The Minister's former Department, the Department for Employment and Learning, announced a remarkable underspend of £51 million. Departmental officials told the Committee for Employment and Learning that they had reduced the underspend to £13 million. Aspects of that underspend left the Committee with many questions about issues such as New Deal and student grants.

It is concerning to read that the Department for Employment and Learning is declaring only £13 million of those easements. "Easement" is a euphemism for carelessness or poor cost-effectiveness. Does the Minister know where the missing £38 million has gone? It is also concerning that there is no explanation of how the easements were reduced to £13 million.

Dr Farren: I do not recall any underspend on the scale that the Member quoted. In the September monitoring round, the Department surrendered £10.6 million, and £6 million was surrendered in December. We are working on the basis of that information, and I accept that those are the real figures.

It is important, when considering services that are demand-led, to appreciate that the prediction of the scale of demand from one year to the next — forecasting in December what the scale of demand will be next September or October — is not an exact science.

We do not know, for example, how many students will be accepted into higher education, so we cannot determine precisely the pressures on that budget. We cannot predict accurately the number of people who will avail of services such as New Deal; the context is set by the number of unemployed people. Recently,

the situation has been generally positive, as the number of unemployed people has dropped considerably. There has, therefore, been less pressure on services included in the New Deal programme. However, the situation could change dramatically. To an extent, the situation is already changing; recent figures show a regrettable increase in unemployment. Pressures on the services provided by the New Deal programme are likely to increase, and we must bear that in mind. The Member did not take account of the particularities of the situation. He needs to look beyond the figures to find an explanation for the underspending.

I echo the Member's welcome of the underspending. Underspend in one Department leaves money to I echo the Member's welcome of the underspending. Underspend in one Department leaves money to meet pressures in other Departments. That is the object of exercises such as the monitoring round.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClelland] in the Chair)

Mr J Kelly: The question was not answered. The figure of £51 million that I quoted came from the Minister's old Department.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If the Member wishes to pursue the matter, he may write to the Minister.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Minister for his statement. This is his first monitoring statement, so I join with those who wish him well with his new responsibilities.

The Minister will not be surprised that I wish to ask him about the part of his statement that relates to his former Department. In particular, I wish to ask about the so-called advance grant of £1 million that is being given to the Lisburn Institute of Further and Higher Education, although that has been mentioned several times this morning. Is the Minister concerned about the perceived unfairness to other further education colleges that have managed to avoid running up such deficits? Is he satisfied that the Department for Employment and Learning's financial monitoring mechanisms are now sufficiently robust to detect colleges and further education colleges that get into financial deficit at a sufficiently early stage — before that deficit reaches £1 million, for example?

I was pleased to note the Minister's response to the previous question. Again, there is a considerable easement in the spending on job programmes, such as New Deal and Jobskills, in the Department for Employment and Learning. This is partly, although not entirely, due to favourable labour market conditions. If unemployment rates are increasing with the effect that it is regrettably necessary to increase such spending again, the Committee for Employment and Learning hopes that the Minister will look favourably on these needs.

Dr Farren: I thank the Member for his questions. I must resist the temptation to answer as if I were still

the Minister for Employment and Learning. I have to satisfy myself, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, that the financial requirements on the Department are robust and meet the criteria tests with regard to public expenditure. I am satisfied that that is the case. It is therefore not my responsibility to answer questions about other unnamed colleges for which the Department for Employment and Learning has responsibility.

11.30 am

In this case, particular requirements have led the Department for Employment and Learning to make a bid on behalf of the Lisburn Institute, which has experienced pressures. As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I make recommendations to the Executive, and the Executive have agreed to provide those funds. I believe that the repayment requirements are justified and are part of the package that has been worked out between the Department and Lisburn Institute.

Dr Birnie has raised issues that other Members have also raised. All programmes within the Department for Employment and Learning, including those associated with New Deal and Jobskills, are demand-led, and the Department responds to the existing demands. When demands recede during the year, money then becomes available which had not been anticipated when the bids for those programmes were first made. It is appropriate that we reallocate those funds in the manner in which the monitoring round requires that we should. We should not point the finger at Departments and say that their planning was not what it should have been. However, we are examining the underspending patterns across Departments to see what lessons can be learnt and what advice can be given on budgetary planning.

Dr Hendron: I congratulate the Minister on his new portfolio. I wish to return to a point that Monica McWilliams made earlier. She referred to the description of a Department as "Centre" on page 3 of the statement annex under "Bids Recommended". There is no Department of the Centre. There are references to "Trust Medical Equipment" and so on, which probably should be dealt with under the heading of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The Minister is aware of the massive pressures on the Health Service. Given that the reviews and consultations on acute hospital services, primary care, public health and community care have identified the need for restructuring and serious investment, can the Minister assure us that he, the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the rest of the Executive will listen carefully to the requests of the Minister of Health, Bairbre de Brún?

Dr Farren: I can give that commitment. The commitment that is being sought is one from myself. However, I cannot speak on behalf of the Executive with respect to their general approach to business. Nonetheless,

from my experience in the Executive, I would say that careful attention is paid to pressures identified by all Ministers.

The concerns expressed by Members of the House, by the health professions and by members of the public are re-echoed in the Executive's deliberations on matters relating to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

We are acutely aware of the pressures. When particular pressures are identified, to which we can respond with the resources available, we do so. The manner in which we have responded to the bids that have been submitted in this monitoring round demonstrates that, as does the additional money over and above that contained in the draft Budget that was identified and made available by my predecessor. The £8 million to which I refer was announced by Mr Durkan in December. To that we are adding almost £7.8 million. Therefore, a total of almost £16 million from the present monitoring round is available for health, which clearly indicates our concerns.

We wish to hear the longer-term strategy plans that the Minister will bring to my Department in the near future. Those plans will be considered in the generally sympathetic way in which the Executive have considered requests from the same Department since I have been a member of the Executive.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I agree with the Minister's statement, which says, as a first step, that we need to ensure that resources are allocated to areas of greatest need. He also pointed out that the Executive are aware of the pressures facing the Health Service. Although I welcome any additional money, the £7.8 million mentioned is there only to meet costs that arise from service activity and junior doctors' contracts.

In his statement, the Minister pointed out that there is a real and immediate benefit to those in need of treatment and care, and he expects that many will ask why we are not doing more. That is my first question. Why are the Minister and the Executive not doing more to meet the pressures in the Health Service? Health is a priority in the Programme for Government and for the Executive. However, slightly less than 10% of the allocated money is going to the Health Service, and that money is non-recurrent. Although I agree with the Minister's previous answer, he did say that long-term planning is needed to tackle the Health Service's problems. However, non-recurrent money does not allow for long-term planning. Does the Minister agree that that shows a need for an increase in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's overall baseline figure?

Dr Farren: Members need to appreciate the nature of the monitoring exercise and the response that is made to the bids. I have made the point at least once

— perhaps more than once — that we have responded 100% to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's bids in this particular monitoring round. We have responded positively to the needs and pressures drawn to our attention and the funding that is required to address them. We could not have responded more positively — we responded 100%, which is as positively as we can respond to any request.

At the risk of repeating myself, the Executive have been sympathetic to health. To make the point as clear as figures possibly can, since devolution, which covers the period from 1999-2000 through to 2001-02, we have agreed additional allocations of nearly £290 million to the health budget. Next year, health spending will be some £224 million, which is almost 10% higher than the provision for the current year.

Those figures represent significant additions and demonstrate the importance that we attach to this particular area. However, we must recognise that additional resources represent only part of the solution. We must ensure that allocated expenditure is used to the greatest possible effect.

Members will be aware that we are carrying out a needs and effectiveness evaluation of health and social care in order to better understand what we are achieving with what we are spending. Given the attention that has been paid to health and health-related issues — and that will continue this afternoon — Members will recognise that there are no easy answers. At the end of the day, we have to live within the overall Budget, and the additional funding for health and social care means that we may allocate less money than is being sought for other areas of public expenditure — but we are doing so in recognition of the particular pressures and requirements that come from this fundamental area of public life.

Mr K Robinson: I too welcome the Minister to his new responsibilities and congratulate him on the competent manner in which he presented his statement to the House.

How much of the allocation for the SPED scheme is targeted directly on the alleviation of distress in north Belfast? Does the statement represent the sum total of resources that are being targeted to that troubled area, or is there other money in the departmental budgets that is as yet unidentified? Does the Minister have a view on the likely amount of additional funding that may be required to address that fundamental problem?

Dr Farren: Approximately £4 million has been allocated in this round to address issues arising from the situation in north Belfast. That comprises the cost of the package of measures announced by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on 3 December, additional work to the roads in the area and additional funding for the SPED scheme. That money could have

been used to address pressures in the Health Service, for example. However, I am sure that the Members who represent the area will agree that it is important to recognise that the area is considerably disadvantaged. This spending will bring some additional benefits to the local community, particularly through the measures that address community safety, infrastructure and education.

The Budget provision for the SPED programme is £9 million, with expenditure to the end of November amounting to £8 million. To date there have been approximately 187 applications, and the anticipated expenditure is now £12 million. That additional provision will ensure that the Housing Executive can continue to assist those people who have been forced to evacuate their homes for security reasons, without taking resources from other areas.

Mr Byrne: I particularly welcome the additional £14 million for public transport, roads and water. I also welcome the extra money allocated under Peace II for various categories of activity. Can the Minister confirm that some Peace II money will be allocated to gap funding for particular sustainable projects? How can the local strategy partnerships bid for extra Peace II money beyond their district council allocations from departmental money?

11.45 am

Dr Farren: Gap funding does precisely what the name suggests — it deals with the needs of particular projects that are likely to benefit from Peace II funding. It is to help projects cross the gap between Peace I funding and Peace II funding with as little difficulty as possible. I pointed out that the allocations within additional resources set aside to meet such projects would have to be carefully scrutinised. It may well be that some projects that receive gap funding might not become eligible for funding under the Peace II programme. Therefore, as my statement indicated, gap funding will provide a soft landing for such projects.

As regards local strategy partnerships and the funding to be made available for projects under the measures for which they will have responsibility, concerns have been raised about the allocations that are being made under the determining formula. Additional funding is available under measures in Peace II other than those for which the local strategy partnerships are primarily responsible. Concerns have been raised particularly in rural areas, but these are not the only sources of support for the types of projects that it is hoped will be promoted in the overall context of the Peace II programme.

Mr Ford: I also welcome the Minister to his new responsibility and wish him well. He has already clearly established that he must do his homework well

when dealing with questions from my Colleague Mr Close. I trust that he will progressively improve his standards over the years.

He has already indicated one thing in answer to other questions — that it would be helpful if he were to publish a list of the bids received as well as those recommended. For example, it emerged only in cross-questioning this morning that the bids from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have been met in full. It would be interesting for Members to see a consolidated list, rather than the items that emerge only through individual Committees.

Secondly, on the issue of health, the Minister referred specifically to the need for longer-term solutions and not quick fixes. How is that position compatible with the fact that while additional hospital and community health pressures attracted £4.5 million, the Department for Regional Development appears to be getting almost £2 million just for salary increases and wages and inflationary pressures, all of which should have been entirely foreseeable at the start of the year? Why can a Department that is not supposed to be a priority get such a large amount compared with the Department that everybody in the Chamber acknowledges is the priority?

Dr Farren: I return to the point that I have made on several occasions — we have met the bids that we were asked to meet. If you meet 100% of a bid you cannot go much beyond that. The Department of Finance and Personnel was asked for a certain amount of money, and we met the bid that was made. Issues relating to whether the Department should make a larger bid are matters that might be taken up by the Committee. It is not for me to answer for a Department as to why it made a particular bid.

That goes for any of the Departments for which the Executive have responsibility. The answer to Mr Ford's first question is "Yes". We will put the information requested in Members' pigeonholes later this afternoon.

Mr Hussey: I welcome the Minister's commitment to an examination of the monitoring system and how it will be affected in the future. The Speaker told Prof McWilliams that the Committees' role in the submission of monitoring round bids might be looked at.

However, unlike Mr Close and, apparently, Mr Ford, I welcome the allocation to the Department for Regional Development — it is long overdue. Obviously Mr Ford and Mr Close do not understand the relationship between good roads that give accessibility to the rural population — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Ford: That is not what it — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Hussey: — in being able to reach facilities. They obviously do not understand the importance of clean water to good health. When you are getting a sound bite you obviously produce effluent; that has to be got rid of, and the Department for Regional Development takes care of that.

I am seeking the Minister's insight on learndirect from his previous role in the Department for Employment and Learning. I understand that there are four district council areas where the network has not yet been established. Strabane is one of them, and my Colleague Mr Beggs reminds me that Larne is another. Can we, through the allocation being awarded, complete the learndirect network? With regard to local strategy partnerships and the areas that have been slightly underfunded previously, does the Minister not agree that many of the other measures are dependent on the district co-ordination that was afforded through the district partnerships and now through the local strategy partnerships?

Dr Farren: Sorry, I was distracted. Would the Member please repeat the second question?

Mr Hussey: With regard to the local strategy partnerships allocation and the reduction in some areas, will the Minister not admit that he has referred to the other measures whereby funding could be achieved, but the overarching district co-ordination of local strategy partnerships is important in ensuring that that funding can be accessed?

Dr Farren: Learndirect is the responsibility of the Department for Employment and Learning. It is not in my remit to answer directly on the development of the learndirect centres. They were being rolled out when I had responsibility for that Department. It was anticipated that 30 or more would be in place during the year. It is more appropriate that my Colleague, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Carmel Hanna, should address issues related to the matters for which she has responsibility.

The involvement of the district councils and the social partners in local strategy partnerships should provide a role for those partnerships that would enable them to look at the general issues related to the development of the areas for which they have responsibility. While they may not have direct responsibility for allocations of other funding, the strategic role, which is captured in their title, would afford them the opportunity to look beyond the immediate allocations for which they have responsibility.

I recently stressed the expectation that those local strategy partnerships would outlast the Peace II funding period. I also stressed that there may be a role for them in a strategic planning and overview capacity beyond that period.

Mr A Maginness: I congratulate the Minister on his recent appointment and welcome his statement. I also welcome the increased allocation of almost £1 million to north Belfast, which demonstrates the Executive's continued commitment to addressing the distressing situation in north Belfast. Will the Minister outline how that money is to be spent? I note the emphasis placed on rebuilding community relations.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, I must ask you to be brief. We must finish on the hour.

Dr Farren: The details of the bid recommended are that the Department of Education has been allocated £230,000 for the north Belfast package, and the Belfast Education and Library Board will receive an additional £265,000 in the February monitoring round; the Department for Regional Development has been allocated £300,000 for roads in the area; through the SPED scheme, the Department for Social Development has been allocated £3 million; and £150,000 has been allocated to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for the north Belfast package. That is how the total amount of £3.945 million will be spent departmentally.

Mr O'Connor: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Did the Speaker not rule that if a Member were not in the Chamber for a ministerial statement he would not be permitted to ask a question? A Member who was not present for Dr Farren's statement was permitted to ask a question. Several Members asked multiple questions, yet other Members sat for an hour and a half without being able to ask their questions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You are correct, Mr O'Connor. A note was made of the Members present when the Minister made his statement. In one case since I came into the Chair, a Member was allowed to ask a question because he was present for the major part of the Minister's statement, and so some licence was granted. I am not aware of any other instance.

Mr O'Connor: I refer to Mr Ford.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you for that information, Mr O'Connor.

Mr Hussey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will Hansard be checked with regard to the Minister's answer to my question? He said that because he was not the Minister responsible he could not provide an answer. However, the Minister earlier gave an answer to his party Colleague Mrs Courtney on a specific question about the North West Institute of Further and Higher Education.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The best way to elicit that information is to write directly to the Minister. We must move on.

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister's civil servants read Hansard in order to address those questions that were not answered by the Minister today?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have already said that if Members feel that a full answer was not given, they are free to write to the Minister.

12.00

CHAULNES AREA

Dr Adamson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the intention of the French Government to build a new airport in the area around Chaulnes in Picardy to serve Paris and requests the UK Government to consult closely with the French Government to ensure that due respect and honour are paid to the graves of those who gave their lives in the two world wars.

I thank my co-sponsors for tabling the motion. In June 1895 the last great Government in the Western World to exhibit all the characteristics of ancient aristocracy took office in England. For the most part they were great landowners and country gentlemen who regarded union with Ireland as sacrosanct and who proudly became the Unionist party to resist the attempts of Mr Gladstone to introduce home rule for Ireland.

They were extremely talented individuals. In that year the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava was British ambassador to Paris, and was well respected by the French. He wrote in his diary that besides reading 11 plays of Aristotle in Greek he had learned, by heart, 24,000 words from the Persian dictionary, 8,000 perfectly, 12,000 pretty well and 4,000 imperfectly.

In 1861 Lord Dufferin built the famous Helen's Tower on his estate at Clandeboye outside Bangor, County Down. It was originally a gamekeeper's residence constructed with the aid of labourers who were made destitute by the recent Great Famine in Ireland. It enshrines today the memory of Helen, the Dowager Lady Dufferin, author of 'The Irish Emigrant', who died in 1867 of breast cancer.

The tower is particularly beautiful, and it was immortalised by the great poets of the age. At the other end of the road that leads to it is the village of Conlig, where a little cottage stands in which William Sloan, my grandmother's cousin, was born. At the age of 19 William joined the 11th Royal Irish Rifles. It became part of the 36th (Ulster) Division, which was formed from the Ulster Volunteer Force under extraordinary political circumstances.

The first world war stands like a searing scar across the face of human history. Time had stood still since the age of Moses and the patriarchs, but the great war was to change that and the whole world forever. Following the outbreak of the war, the British Army raised 82 battalions in Ireland by the end of 1914, of which Ulster contributed 42. Out of 145,000 voluntary recruits from Ireland, Ulster contributed approximately 75,000. No fewer than 46,000 recruits were from Belfast, which stood second on the roll of British cities for numbers of

recruits in proportion to population until the imposition of universal service.

In addition to the famous 36th (Ulster) Division, there were six battalions of the regular Army from Ulster, five Ulster battalions from the 10th (Irish) Division and five more in the 16th (Irish) Division. Inspired by old family traditions, many Ulstermen chose to enlist in Scottish battalions such as the 6th Black Watch and 4th Seaforth Highlanders, who also had a recruiting office in Belfast. These formed part of the 51st (Highland) Division. Others joined the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. There were also many Ulstermen in the London Irish, the Church Lads' battalion of the King's Royal Rifles, the Bantam battalions and the Royal Scots, Cheshires and Sherwood Foresters. Besides the recruits from Ireland, many men who had been born in Ulster were to be found in the Dominion troops, especially among the Canadians, with whom two Ulstermen won the Victoria Cross.

The advance of the 36th (Ulster) Division at the commencement of the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916, when they sustained 5,500 casualties, is perhaps the most memorable single episode of the war, and it stands as one of the finest displays of human courage in the history of mankind.

Then, in September 1916, the 16th (Irish) Division entered the Somme battlefields with an equal display of courage at the battles of Guillemont and Ginchy. This division was mainly Nationalist in origin and included within its ranks many members of the National Volunteers, including 600 men of the Connaught Rangers from the Falls Road area of west Belfast, and B company of the 6th Royal Irish, which was composed exclusively of Derry Nationalists. In the first days of September it lost 200 out of 435 officers and 4,090 out of 10,410 men from other ranks among its infantry and engineer units. However, in doing so it gave Ireland a national character in Europe. It was the like of those men who made the Irish nation.

On the site of the advance of William and his comrades at Thiepval, a handsome memorial tower was erected by public subscription raised in the North of Ireland in memory of the officers, non-commissioned officers and men of the 36th (Ulster) Division, the sons of Ulster in other forces who died in the Great War and all their comrades-in-arms who were spared to return. The tower — modelled on Helen's Tower at Clandeboye, where William and his comrades had trained near to his home — was opened on 19 November 1921 by Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson, chief of the imperial general staff. On 1 July 1989, under the auspices of the Fasset youth and community development programme, it was rededicated in the presence of HRH Princess Alice, Duchess of Gloucester. Veterans of the Great War, including the 36th (Ulster) Division, were accompanied to the ceremony by dignitaries

and public representatives from throughout Northern Ireland, some of whom are present in the Chamber today. It is presently administered by the Somme Association, of which I am Chairman.

Every 1 July we go with the Somme Association, the Farset organisation, the Ulster Society and Thiepval Memorial LOL 1916 to visit Thiepval and the great memorial by Sir Edward Lutyens, on which William's name is inscribed. On that day we commemorate the sacrifice of our loved ones who died for freedom. We do not seek to glorify war; rather we seek to see that it does not happen again.

To the mothers of Ulster we say "Mothers of Ulster, do not grieve, for your sons lie together with their former adversaries in the bosom of a proud and noble nation; they are not now solely the sons of Ulster, because they have also become the sons of France." To the sons of Ulster we say "Sons of Ulster, soldiers of Ireland, do not be anxious for we will never forget you."

Therefore it was with some anxiety that we learned that the French Government are planning to build a third airport in the Somme area about 130 km north of Paris to serve the city. The area of Chaulnes has been chosen for the airport, and there is speculation that the villages of Rosières, Vauvillers and Vermandovillers will be threatened, and with them the first world war British, French and German cemeteries in the area. However, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission tells us that this area was mainly a French area of operations in the Great War and that relatively few Commonwealth war graves could conceivably be affected. It is seeking further clarification from the authorities and will make strong representations to them should there be any proposal to disturb the graves. The French Government have, in the past, avoided the need to disturb war cemeteries when similar development has taken place. There is no reason to believe that they will act differently in this instance.

We understand from the French authorities that the perimeter of the final site is yet to be defined and that that is unlikely to be done until the end of February at the earliest. Before a final decision is made there will be consultations with all interested Governments, especially the British Government. The French Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, has made a firm commitment on that. The French authorities say that they are anxious to respect and honour those who gave their lives for our common freedom. However, I have had numerous representations from worried constituents about this, and I hope that their fears will be unfounded.

One constituent raised the subject of the war grave in Belfast City Cemetery, where 350 memorial stones are currently in storage. That similar problem, though closer to home, also needs to be resolved.

Mr Deputy Speaker: A substantial number of Members have indicated their wish to speak in this debate. Therefore I must limit Members' contributions to eight minutes each.

Mr K Robinson: I support the motion and trust that every Member will join me in doing so.

The events in France from 1914 to 1918 have touched the lives of all of us, irrespective of our political allegiance or aspirations. Anyone who has travelled through or lingered in the area between Paris and the Channel coast will have experienced the special aura that descends over that part of Picardy. The vast scale of the battles that raged with such ferocity in that area over 80 years ago is contrasted by the tranquillity of the graveyards which hold the remains of the men from the armies of France, Britain and their empires, as well as their opponents in the German ranks. Such was the scale of the slaughter and the impact on the survivors that the French Government granted the land containing war graves in perpetuity to "those who rest forever in this earth."

If the proposed airport to serve Paris is sited in Picardy, close to Chaulnes, Rosières-en-Santerre and Lihons, it will create environmental and ecological change and will impact on those who live there today. However, it will also set a precedent by which the displacement of war graves will become tolerable; then acceptable; then normal practice. Those who have not spent time in Picardy may be unaware that even today, human remains, cap badges, items of equipment, shrapnel and items of ordnance are still found in the corn fields or turned over by farmers' ploughs in a grim annual harvest.

Any move to disrupt the tranquillity that pervades these last resting places must be opposed. The quest for a site for a new airport must proceed with the same sensitivity that accompanied the building of the high-speed TGV rail link between Paris and the Channel coast. If the site for a Paris airport were to lie across the mincer of Verdun, which is so central to the French psyche, I wonder what the reaction in that country might be? I trust that the French authorities will see how sensitive the graveyards of Picardy are to the British and Commonwealth psyche.

I will complete my appeal by reminding Members of the benefits that have accrued to our society through the largesse of the European Union, which is based on the desire of the French and the Germans never to repeat the carnage of two world wars. Surely it is fitting to ensure that such sacrifices are honoured in perpetuity. The French Ambassador in London, in reply to my recent letter, underlined that his Government are still open to consultation with the UK Government, among others, prior to a final decision being taken on the site for the new Paris airport.

There are eight potential sites for the airport. Given the air, road and rail traffic chaos that exists in the band between Paris and the Channel coast, surely the French Government will reconsider positioning an airport south of Paris. They once looked at the potential of an airport in the Chartres region; perhaps that idea should be revisited.

I urge the House unanimously to request that our Prime Minister and his Government consult closely with their French counterparts to prevent that precedent from being set. I remind Members that the war dead of many nations either lie in recognised graves, or appear on the rolls of honour to the missing. In many cases they still lie undiscovered in this sombre area. I read recently about Private Richard Clarke, who, 85 years after his death, was suddenly discovered and has now been laid to rest in an honourable grave.

12.15 pm

I will share one or two recollections of my stay in the village of Authuille, which is beside the Thiepval monument that carries the names of hundreds of thousands of Allied dead who have no known graves. In the graveyard of Authuille lies the body of Willie McBride — the same Willie Mc Bride referred to in the haunting ballad “The Green Fields of France”. In that cemetery, I met a young Dutch lady. She did not belong to the generation of either the first or second world wars. When I asked her why she was visiting that particular grave, she said that the words of the song had driven her to make a pilgrimage.

In those tear-jerking cemeteries in France there are posies of flowers placed by grandchildren who never knew their grandparents. The echoes of the war of 1914 and the more recent conflict from 1939 to 1945 still resonate throughout Europe and beyond. I ask that Members support the motion unanimously and to add their respect to the memory of the war dead.

Mr O'Connor: I support the motion. I had the privilege of visiting the Somme area in July last year. As has been pointed out, the area still yields human remains. It could be said that the whole area is a cemetery and should therefore be treated with due respect.

I was nominated by my council to make that visit, and I went because my great-grandfather was killed in the Battle of the Somme. His name was John Stewart, and he was in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. I logged on to the web site of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Unfortunately, I did not know my great-grandfather's service number, but I knew his name and regiment. I found that 17 people called John Stewart from that regiment were killed in the conflict. That shows the scale and the horror of what happened.

Many people have hang-ups about going to the war cemeteries. They think that that war affects only one

tradition. I visited the memorial at Thiepval and the memorial to the Irish Divisions at Guillemont. Like Mr Ken Robinson, I visited Authuille Military Cemetery. The area should be kept in a manner that shows respect for those who gave their lives in both world wars. When I went there I was shocked. I thought that the trenches would be hundreds of yards apart. However, at Vimy Ridge, where the Canadians fought — many of whom would have had roots in Ireland, North and South — some of the trenches were as close as I am to Dr Adamson, who is across the Chamber.

I do not want to take this point too far, but we now have an Island of Ireland Peace Park at Messines Ridge in Flanders, to which £100,000 was allocated in the December monitoring rounds. If we are truly interested in reconciliation with each other and with our past, it is time to move on and learn from the past. We must respect our shared past as well as our individual pasts. People say that those who died gave their todays for our tomorrows. We should give up our hang-ups of yesterday, so that we can all have a better tomorrow.

Finally, the Irish Government should acknowledge all the Irishmen who died. Instead of the single posy of flowers that President McAleese sent to the memorial at Guillemont on the 1 July 2001, the Irish Government should properly acknowledge the men of Ireland who died in Flanders' fields believing that they were fighting for home rule.

I support the motion brought before the House by Mr Adamson, Mr Ken Robinson, and Minister Foster.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion, and I compliment the Members who brought it before the Assembly.

The Assembly has been touched by the French Government's proposal. Members read with disgust and horror the news that they are considering building a runway over war graves at the Somme. It is incredible that anyone could disregard the graves of the brave men who fought valiantly for freedom and democracy more than 80 years ago. However, press reports have indicated that such a plan is being considered.

The manager of the Somme Heritage Centre, Mr Billy Irvine, suggested that the site of the intended runway is not necessarily in the Somme itself, but along the Somme River, outside Paris, where the graves of the British, French and German soldiers who fought the 1914 battles are situated. The site contains approximately 60 graves of British soldiers. It is understood that some of those soldiers hailed from Northern Ireland, and it is almost certain that some were from the Ulster regiments. The proposed runway would affect thousands of dead soldiers' graves.

The local press has indicated that a similar motion is to be tabled at Westminster. Some Assembly Members

have dual hats — those of MLA and MP — and they tend to wear them.

Mr Campbell: My Colleagues and I have tabled a similar motion at Westminster. There has been a remarkable degree of support among MPs across the divide. It is now a case of galvanising the opposition to the proposal.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is encouraging that the motion has support at council level, at Assembly level and at Westminster level.

Several hundred thousand graves across the world hold the remains of courageous local boys who went far away to fight a war for democracy so that we could enjoy our lives in relative peace. Some of those men died lonely and hungry, ill-clothed for the climate and a long way from home. Do we intend to honour their memory by building a runway over their graves? Some of us had relatives who were killed in the first world war. A small number of us had friends who were killed beside them at the Somme and elsewhere during the first world war. Northern Ireland is a small, close-knit country. When one of us is killed, each and every one of us is affected.

That is why we support the poppy appeal every year, which started in earnest in 1921. The poppy has come to represent all that is good and, at the same time, all that is horrifying about war. Today it is the predominant image of the Great War. I know nobody who can watch with a dry eye the release of poppy leaves during the service at the Albert Hall on the night before Remembrance Sunday. Imagine that the only thing of beauty that those brave men — and many young women who served as nurses — could see in that grey and desolate landscape of carnage and inhumanity was that simple red flower. Poppies covered the fields when man's inhumanity exploded into the world with a ferocity not seen in any period before the first world war.

The French Government now intend to build a runway on the cemetery where the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the British Legion have endeavoured to create peace, solace and respect. The French authorities obviously do not care about the honour and respect that is due to their own citizens, since some French citizens who fought for freedom and democracy are buried there.

As one who has served in the armed forces, I know at first hand a little of what was expected of those men. However, I can in no way begin to comprehend how awful it was for those young men to see the bodies and to smell the mortality of men all around them. Through the enormous loss of life during the first world war, the armed forces were able to refine their strategies and develop more sensible — if that is

the correct terminology — forms of warfare, instead of throwing men in front of guns and shells.

We owe much to those men, whether they were from France, England, Ulster or from the Irish regiments. They gave their all, and we must do something to protect their final resting places. We must petition the Foreign Office Minister at Westminster to intervene on behalf of the dead soldiers to protect their graves from the encroaching runway.

Our only hope lies in the fact that, some five years ago, Eurostar had planned to run trains through the cemeteries. The company was persuaded to bypass the site and, therefore, honour all those who gave their lives. As a result of that, it is imperative that we get involved and voice our disgust and horror at the intention of the French to dig up our slumbering heroes. We must translate that disquiet into action. We urge the Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Office to intervene.

The Battle of the Somme played a vital role in the history of our small country. Over 20,000 casualties came from what was then the entire island of Ireland. One poignant example is that of three brothers from Comber who joined up at the same time, were killed together at the Somme in one machine gun swathe and are buried together. That illustrates the impact of the war on families and communities — every village, town and city in Northern Ireland felt its effects.

It is believed that the British Government sent the Ulster troops to almost certain slaughter, so the British Government should make amends. That is why it is important that the matter be addressed at Westminster in an attempt to prevent those who are buried in Chaulnes from being disturbed by what is called "progress".

There are many reasons for observing Remembrance Sunday in Northern Ireland. Many of our fellow citizens have been lost to the ruthlessness of terrorism. One such tragedy took place at the cenotaph in Enniskillen. On Remembrance Sunday we remember, as a nation, not only the dead of the first world war, but those whom we knew personally, and who were killed by undemocratic, ruthless and tyrannical terrorists who thought that they could get the state that they wanted by killing.

Eighty years ago, young men went to fight against exactly the same thing. Now, the bodies of some of those who died while trying to fend off the despotic German leadership of the time are to be moved to make way for a runway. If this were proposed in respect of a graveyard in east — or, indeed, west — Belfast, opposition would have to be expressed only once before the plans would be stopped in their tracks. It is imperative that we put a stop to the proposed runway by adding our voices of rejection as an Assembly and as a country.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I compliment Ian Adamson on his eloquent address when moving the motion. As always, he was articulate and civilised in his remarks, and I thank him for that.

Nationalists and Republicans have always had problems with commemorating the first world war. Nationalists, and Republicans in particular, have felt that the war was hijacked — if I may use that word — by Unionism. In many ways, Nationalists felt that they were excluded from commemorating those who fought that war believing, as John Redmond did, that it would deliver home rule for Ireland. There is, and has been, an ambivalence or unease in Nationalism in respect of the remembrance of that event. There is also unease with the poppy. I do not want to discuss that, because it would be inappropriate to do so, regardless of how provocatively the issue may have been introduced.

We recall that many fought in the first world war. I do not mean to glorify war. Ian Adamson said that the first world war “stands like a searing scar across the face of history.” Indeed, it is a monument to the savagery of war, in which ordinary men, on the instruction of generals who sat in the background, were sent to their deaths like lambs to the slaughter.

12.30 pm

One must ask, as did Francis Ledwidge,

“for what and for why?”

From a Nationalist point of view there are many complexities, doubts and misgivings in that issue, not because we do not remember or think respectfully of those who died at that time but because of the political manner in which it has been hijacked by Unionism. General Tom Barry fought in the first world war and returned to fight in the war of independence for Ireland. Several of the Connaught Rangers were executed in India because they mutinied against the executions of 1916. My own grandfather went to war in 1916. The letter received said that Private John Kelly, aged 37, husband of Maria Kelly, of 4 Marlin Street, Belfast, County Antrim had died on 9 September 1916. He had come from a staunchly Nationalist background.

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You have always been very quick to point it out to others if they depart from the motion. The Member of Sinn Féin goes on to eulogise those who fell in 1916.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I shall bear that in mind, Mr Wilson.

Mr J Kelly: My grandfather was a Redmondite. He did not need to go to war. He was employed at that time, but he went to war because he followed John Redmond and Joe Devlin in the belief that he fought

for the freedom of small nations, for home rule for Ireland. However, one of the ironies — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Ervine: Does the Member accept that it may also have been in the mind of his grandfather and of Redmond that they were fighting for home rule for the French?

Mr J Kelly: That is a good point, but I talk about Ireland and would prefer not to get into that. Perhaps it is partly our own fault, but from our perspective the situation has been clouded by the way in which the matter has almost become the domain of Unionism, Protestantism or Loyalism. However, I think that Ian Adamson said that there were 75,000 volunteers from Ulster — 46,000 of them from Belfast — and 150,000 from the other part of Ireland. The difficulty is not in respecting or remembering. It is that we as a community have been made to feel excluded.

As Ian Adamson said, this is a monument to savagery. Many of those people went to that war because they had no other means of livelihood. Some went believing that they fought for the freedom of small nations. Others from the Protestant community believed that they fought for God, Ulster and the Crown.

It is a holy ground, as all graveyards should be. As such, they should not be desecrated. Significantly, they should not be desecrated by Governments. For that reason we support the motion, and we thank Ian Adamson for taking an eloquent and civilised approach.

Mrs E Bell: Today’s debate is an appeal. I hope that if the motion is unanimously passed, it will reduce the feelings of exclusion that some of us have about the first and second world wars and bring us together in a spirit of understanding.

We ask the French Government that, when considering their development plans for facilities such as the new airport in Paris, as formally agreed, the war graves be allowed to remain in their present locations, with due care and attention being given to them in the memory of those who are buried there. As other Members have said, we ask them to remember that the people who are buried there include German soldiers, men and women from all over Ireland and people from England, Scotland, Wales and Canada.

All too often in this modern and inconsiderate world it is easy to forget our past, to forget the tens of thousands of people — some of whom were only children — who made the supreme sacrifice in both wars. I hope that some day all of us, whether Catholic, Protestant, Nationalist or Loyalist, will acknowledge the contribution that those who died made to our future. I endorse Mr O’Connor’s comments about the Republic of Ireland. As he said, those people gave their tomorrows for our todays.

For years the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, with the help of French councillors and others, has

kept the war graves in pristine condition. They have ensured that the fields around the graveyards, which were once battle areas, are preserved in an acknowledgement of those who fell in battle, never to receive the last rites or a decent burial.

As another Member said, we cannot allow such a precedent to be set for the destruction of, disruption to, and disrespect for that pertaining to the fallen of the two world wars. We must continue to oppose any such destruction in the graveyards in Rosiers and the other villages that were mentioned, which are now threatened — and there is another development plan for an area near Ypres in Belgium that we must worry about.

The graveyards, battlefields and pathways should be left for the many who come throughout the year to pay their respects to friends and family. I have visited such places several times. Even though I have only two relatives buried there, I remember the strength of feelings that the visits gave me and the impressions that they made on me. I would hate to see them desecrated in any way.

People with little knowledge of the subject do not need to travel to France for an initial impression. They can go to the Somme Heritage Centre and get the information that is crucial to gaining an understanding of the problem.

The Assembly must send a clear message to the French Government that they must alter their plans so that all who are interred in the graveyards may continue to rest in peace. It is essential that they pull back and pay their tribute to the fallen who gave their lives so that all of us, including the French, could have a future.

Death is the main certainty in life. It is important that Members recognise that today's motion is on behalf of all who died, regardless of creed, background or tradition. It also reflects the attitude of those who went to their deaths.

I end with a quote from the poem 'In Flanders Field', which I hope will be remembered by the French Government and all involved in the final decisions.

"If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields."

I support the motion.

Mr Boyd: I support the motion, and all true democrats should endorse it. The proposed plans to build an airport on the site of the Battle of the Somme are distressing, particularly for the families of those buried there — and that includes many from Northern Ireland — who are faced with the prospect of the graves of their loved ones being moved or disturbed.

The proposed site for the new airport would involve clearing a large area and disturbing the graves of many

British and Commonwealth soldiers. I welcome the assurances from the junior Defence Minister, Dr Lewis Moonie, that if the proposals seem to affect cemeteries containing British and Commonwealth graves, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission will firmly resist plans to disturb the war dead.

More than one million soldiers were killed in the battle of the Somme, which took place between 1 July 1916 and 19 November 1916. The small number of survivors of the battle firmly oppose the proposed airport. People who live close to the site also oppose the plans. Residents state that the airport would dishonour the memory of the thousands of soldiers buried in the area. A British cemetery, containing the remains of 20 soldiers killed in March 1918, also falls within the proposed airport boundary, as does a large French military cemetery, which contains six British graves.

The proposed site is the final resting place of about 100,000 British soldiers. Thousands of graves may be dug up to make way for the construction. It is vital that the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence intervene in the matter. The Somme battlefield has a special place in the hearts of the people of Northern Ireland. On 1 July 1916, the 36th (Ulster) Division lost 5,500 men at the Somme, and their supreme sacrifice must always be honoured with the dignity that it deserves.

On 1 July 1916 alone, Britain suffered over 57,000 casualties — the biggest ever loss in a single day. Between 1 July 1916 and 19 November 1916, British and Commonwealth casualties totalled 420,000, while the French suffered 200,000 casualties. The Battle of the Somme has been described by many as "hell on earth" — *[Interruption]*. We must never forget the gallantry and resolute courage of all those who fought in the Battle of the Somme. The words "We will remember them" from 'The Ode', the fourth stanza of the poem 'For the fallen', which is recited at remembrance services each year, have never been so poignant. I support the motion.

Mr Agnew: Several years ago, on a visit to the Somme, the late Harold McCusker happened to be in the same group as me. We visited the Wytshaete cemetery, where there is a memorial to the 16th (Irish) Division. Harold McCusker's great, great grandfather served with the 16th (Irish) Division, and his headstone is in that cemetery. The late Canon Hugh Murphy was also in the group. He was a Roman Catholic priest who had served with distinction in the Royal Navy during the last world war. He took a service — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am not sure where the disruption is coming from, but it is very discourteous to the House. Mr Agnew, please continue.

Mr Agnew: The late Canon Hugh Murphy conducted a service at the cemetery. Dr Ian Adamson was also there. Presbyterians, Free Presbyterians, Anglicans

and Roman Catholics attended the service. However, my lasting memory is that two councillors from Down District Council laid the wreath — one was a Nationalist and one was a Unionist. The Nationalist was a member of the SDLP and the Unionist was a member of the Ulster Unionist Party. The Nationalist was a member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians; the Unionist was an Orangeman. The Nationalist put on his Ancient Order of Hibernians collarette; the Orangeman put on his Orange collarette, and together they walked to the memorial to the men of the 16th (Irish) Division to lay the wreath. That is a lasting memory that I will have of all of the journeys that I have made to the Somme battlefields.

I welcome the conciliatory note in the House, and we should never forget that people of all races, all religions, both sexes and every walk of life lost their lives during the Great War. We talk about the 5,500 men who lost their lives, or who were wounded during the first two days of fighting at the Somme, and we should never forget the supreme sacrifice — the Somme took the lives of about one million people. However, many more millions — perhaps as many as 10 million — lost their lives in the Great War. Although I would never consider myself a pacifist, a visit to the Somme battlefield would be the one thing that might tip me over the edge towards pacifism. The deaths on those battlefields were such a terrible waste of human life, such a dreadful sacrifice. We hear much about lions being led by donkeys — that may be true. However, we must remember the supreme bravery and sacrifice of the people from Ireland, North and South.

12.45 pm

I fully acknowledge the difficulty that Nationalists have with 1916 for all sorts of political reasons that intermingle in the Ulster story. We cannot ignore the fact that people from all communities and walks of life, North and South, lost their lives during the Great War. We should never forget their supreme sacrifice.

In the aftermath of the war, we were told that the French had given land over in perpetuity to be used as cemeteries in Picardy, Flanders Field and Belgium. That land was to be a resting place for those who had lost their lives during the Great War, so that subsequent generations could visit and pay homage to them. I have a problem with the issue of “in perpetuity”; it must be resolved, and perhaps this is the ideal opportunity to do so. If that land was granted in perpetuity, why are we faced with the problem of the closure of the Chaulnes area in Picardy, where many soldiers lost their lives in particularly horrific circumstances?

Those lives were not necessarily lost to enemy weaponry and warfare; many died in a very simple way. The soldiers wore heavy packs on their backs and the ground in that area had been churned up through the ravages of war. As a result, those soldiers, weakened

by war, underfed and undernourished, sank to their knees in the mud and fell to the ground face down. Many of them drowned in a sea of mud in an area close to where it is proposed that the third airport for Paris be built.

I support the motion and congratulate my three Colleagues for tabling it. We must never forget the supreme sacrifice made, not only by Ulstermen and Irishmen, but by soldiers and people from throughout the free world. That supreme sacrifice has guaranteed freedom and democracy. We must always remember that.

Mr Foster: I support the motion. The issue is emotive, and it is important to Northern Ireland, Ulster, the whole island of Ireland and far beyond. I have been to the Somme battlefields on several occasions to pay tribute to those who fought and died. The remains of an uncle on my mother’s side still lie in France, and I have two other uncles who returned home from that terrible scene.

I say to Mr John Kelly that this issue is not about “isms”; it is about citizenship, then and now.

Shortly before Christmas it was brought to my attention that the French Government planned to build a third airport for Paris, which was to be situated in the Somme area. As a result, I wrote to the French Embassy in London and to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to establish the facts and register my opposition to such a plan, if indeed it were the case. It goes without saying that I oppose any move to disturb the final resting place of the many thousands of Ulstermen, from both traditions, who made the ultimate sacrifice in the first world war, and who lie there side by side. They died in defence of freedom and by their actions helped ensure French liberty. It would be an outrage if the French Government were to permit any interference whatsoever with these graves at this particular time.

As regards local interest, there is greater regard in the Republic of Ireland now than ever before about the first world war. There are numerous associations there, and I am friendly with several people from the Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association who are thirsting for information about the first world war and are working hard to learn about what took place — who fought, who died and who gave their lives.

I have received replies from the French Ambassador and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The Ambassador has assured me that the French authorities

“have the greatest respect for the graves of those who fell on French soil”,

and he sought to clarify several points. He said that even though a decision has been taken to build a new airport in the region, the exact location has not yet

been decided and consultations are under way into a number of factors. He promised that

“proper consideration will be given to the existence of military cemeteries”,

and pledged that

“all possible measures will be taken to protect the cemeteries.”

Further to that, he said

“if it should prove necessary to remove some of the graves, extreme care would be taken to treat all human remains with due respect and dignity and rebury them, if so required, at an appropriate and accessible location...the cost would be borne by the French Government.”

Ambassador Bernard said that the French Prime Minister had given a firm commitment that before the final decision is taken there will be consultations with all interested Governments, especially Her Majesty’s Government. He concluded by saying that the French authorities and public

“respect and honour those who gave their lives for our common freedom”.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission said that it was aware of the concern caused by recent media reports, but took the view that

“until the proposals and their implications are clear, the suggestion that Commonwealth War Graves will be disturbed is mainly speculation”.

Significantly, the commission did point out that the area around Chaulnes, chosen for the airport, was mainly a French area of operations and considered that few Commonwealth war graves would be affected. However, while my primary concern is about the graves of those Ulstermen who fell, I would still be concerned if the last resting place of the men of any nationality were placed at any risk. That is vital.

The commission said that it was seeking further clarification and would make strong representations should there be any proposal to disturb the graves. It also pointed out that the French Government have, in the past, avoided the need to disturb war cemeteries when similar developments have taken place, notably the TGV fast rail link. It said that it has no reason to believe that the French will act differently in this instance. I therefore propose that the House should monitor the situation, offer support to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and continue to press the French authorities to live up to their promise that

“the French Authorities and public respect and honour those who gave their lives for our common freedom”.

In conclusion, and in memory of those who served and died, I will paraphrase General Douglas MacArthur when he referred to soldiers in another campaign. We did not know of the dignity of their birth, but we must respect the sacrifice and glory of their death and their last resting place. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: One more Member will speak, and then Dr Adamson will wind up the debate. Rather than stop the debate and return to it after lunch, I am extending the time to allow Dr Adamson to speak.

Mrs Courtney: I support the motion, and I congratulate Dr Adamson, Mr Foster and Mr Ken Robinson, for bringing it to the House today. We have had a detailed explanation of the history from our two historians, Dr Adamson and Mr Agnew, so there is very little for the rest of us to say regarding the historical context in which the Somme is regarded.

The proposed site is in the middle of a first world war Somme battlefield, and the new airport will involve clearing a large area and possibly disturbing the graves of many Irish, British and Commonwealth soldiers. If the plan is realised and the war dead are disturbed, it will be widely opposed, for it has already been said that more than half a million soldiers were killed at the Battle of the Somme between July and November 1916. The remains of at least 25 British soldiers and 41 Commonwealth soldiers will have to be exhumed and reburied if the airport gets the go-ahead.

The residents of Chaulnes oppose the scheme and say that the airport will dishonour the memory of the thousands of first world war soldiers who are buried in the area. The people of Ireland, North and South, irrespective of their religious or political backgrounds, regard burial grounds as sacred and, therefore, agree that the plan should be opposed. The Battle of the Somme in particular has great significance for the people of the North, both Unionists and Nationalists, and there has been real acknowledgement of the part played by the Irish regiments in both wars.

For that reason I know about the monument at Thiepval, which was first brought to my attention years ago by Ian Adamson. For the same reason, after many years of planning, two politicians from very different backgrounds, Glen Barr from my city of Derry and Paddy Harte from Donegal, a member of Dáil Éireann, collaborated in taking a team of young people to ensure that there would be a permanent monument to the war dead at Messines in Flanders, which was officially opened by Queen Elizabeth, the queen of England, by President Mary McAleese and by the Belgian king. That was a real watershed, which showed how the world wars, and those who gave their lives in them, are regarded by people, North and South.

The monument was opened by these three very prominent people, together with the relatives of the young men who had their short lives ended far away from home. For that reason we must oppose the plan to put an airport through the Somme battlefield. We must respect the memory of the dead and acknowledge the hurt that will be caused if the development proceeds.

Like Dr Adamson I have also been lobbied by relatives, and at the end of last year I met with the deputy burgomaster of Messines and related the concerns of many people to him. He assured me that he shared our concerns and would bring them to his council and support our opposition to the plan. For that reason I am very happy to support the motion, and I hope that it gets the full support of the House.

Dr Adamson: I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate. My co-proposers, Ken Robinson and Sam Foster, made several interesting points about Chaulnes and the Somme. Ken Robinson said that the land was given in perpetuity, which is true. The displacement of war graves must be opposed, or it will become an acceptable fact of life. Ken Robinson did, however, say that the French Government gave due sensitivity to the building of the TGV fast rail link, and perhaps that sensitivity will be seen in Chaulnes as well. But what if Verdun had been proposed as a site for an airport? Surely that could never have been considered in France. Ken Robinson thought that the Chartres region might be a much more appropriate alternative.

Danny O'Connor, who accompanied us to the Somme last year, spoke of his relatives and of the 16th (Irish) Division's memorial at Guillemont. Of course, the whole area is a cemetery, which stretches as far north as Belgium, where the Island of Ireland Peace Park now exists in Messines. Annie Courtney spoke of that area, which was developed by Glen Barr and Paddy Harte through the auspices of the two Governments. Although the Irish Government could perhaps do more to acknowledge the first world war, they have already done a lot for the development of the Island of Ireland Peace Park.

Frazer Agnew spoke of Wytshaete near Messines, where our old friends Harold McCusker and Canon Murphy came together at the wonderful ceremony that we had there. Jim Shannon was quite distressed about the problem that surrounds the area. His Colleague, Gregory Campbell showed us that our colleagues at Westminster are completely involved in the issue. Westminster, this Assembly, the local councils and our European colleagues all have a part to play in preventing any desecration of sites in France.

1.00 pm

Mr Campbell spoke of the great role of the Royal British Legion. The Royal British Legion has accompanied our Somme Association to France on every occasion, and has done much to help the veterans of the first and second world wars and other conflicts. We join Jim Shannon in urging the Foreign Office to take a strong attitude toward the French Government in this respect.

John Kelly spoke of the problems that Nationalists have because of their feeling of exclusion. I hope that

that feeling will eventually die out. On our first visit to the Somme we visited the grave of Willie Redmond — brother of John Redmond — who was really too old to fight in the first world war. When Willie Redmond was wounded with the 16th (Irish) Division, he was brought to a local first aid camp by members of the old Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).

The rights of small nations were very much a focal point for those Nationalists who went to France, because of the invasion of Belgium. I take great heart that Tom Hartley, a Sinn Féin councillor on Belfast City Council, now takes people round the first world war sites in the Belfast City Cemetery and Milltown Cemetery.

Mrs Eileen Bell has been one of the most loyal supporters of the Somme Association and has been to the sites in France several times. She spoke of her hope that the Irish Republic would take more notice of the first world war. She also spoke of another issue that will loom large in the following weeks and months — the development plans at Ypres, where the proposed motorway goes right through Passchendaele, where so many people fell. She gave a plug to the Somme Heritage Centre between Bangor and Newtownards, where you can see whole episodes of the first world war from both Unionist and Nationalist perspectives.

Norman Boyd said that the proposed plans were distressing. He hoped that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission would firmly oppose the plans. I feel that it will. We have been in frequent contact, and it promises to press the point completely. We must never forget the sacrifice that those men and women made in the first world war.

My friend, Sam Foster, has accompanied us regularly to France over the years — first as a councillor and then as an MLA. He spoke about the increasing knowledge in the South of Ireland about the first world war, and in particular the work of his friends, the Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association. I went to the Dublin Civic Museum to see its presentation a year ago. It was remarkable; the place was packed. I have also visited Drogheda to see the cross-border co-operation apropos the first world war that exists in that city.

There is consensus in the House, among both Nationalists and Unionists, for this proposal, which I am glad of. In Helen's Tower at Clondeboye there is a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, which is perhaps the best poem written about Helen's Tower. It reads:

"Helen's Tower here I stand
Dominant over sea and land
Son's love built me, and I hold
Mother's love in lettered gold.
Would my granite girth were strong
to either love, to last as long.
I would wear my crown entire
to and thro' the Doomsday fire,

and be found of angel eyes
In earth's recurring Paradise."

The memorial room of the Ulster Tower at Thiepval has, carved in gold around each of the walls, the first four lines, only slightly altered to make them a fitting tribute to those other sons — the sons of Ulster and the sons of Ireland — who together passed through "Doomsday fire" for their king and country or for the rights of small nations

"Helen's Tower here I stand
Dominant over sea and land
Son's love built me and I hold
Ulster's love in lettered gold."

Their name liveth for ever. Thank you for supporting this motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the intention of the French Government to build a new airport in the area around Chaulnes in Picardy to serve Paris and requests the UK Government to consult closely with the French Government to ensure that due respect and honour are paid to the graves of those who gave their lives in the two world wars.

The sitting was suspended at 1.06 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair) —

HEALTH CRISIS IN HOSPITALS

2.00 pm

Mrs I Robinson: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take immediate action to address the health crisis in our hospitals.

I wish to make it abundantly clear from the outset that the motion is in no way intended as an attack on, or criticism of, the dedicated people who work hard and with professionalism at all levels of the National Health Service. Indeed, it is because of the pressures faced by the doctors, nurses and support staff in the National Health Service and, in turn, the negative impact on patients in Northern Ireland that the DUP sought the opportunity to debate the matter.

I pay tribute to all Health Service employees for the continued loyalty to their vocations despite the serious conditions in which they work. It is certainly not the pay and conditions, or the stress-free environment that encourages them to keep working in the Health Service. Without their dedication, the current crisis would be one hundred times worse.

The Dickensian state of our Health Service shows no sign of improvement. Each time the issue is debated in the Assembly or elsewhere, circumstances have inevitably become more serious, and the crisis deepens. Some have described the current crisis as a "meltdown" of the National Health Service. We are certainly heading that way. Every possible index of the state of the Health Service illustrates clearly that deterioration, through the long waiting lists, the long hours worked by junior doctors, the number of trolley waits and the lack of community care packages.

I note, sadly, that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety decided not to take up the genuine offer from Dr Peter Maguire, the chairman of the Northern Ireland Junior Doctors Committee of the British Medical Association, to shadow him at Craigavon Area Hospital. Had she done so, she would surely have had confirmed to her at first hand just how bad things are becoming.

It does not get much worse for the National Health Service when we consider the disgraceful acts of violence that took place at Altnagelvin Hospital at the weekend. That mindless and thuggish violence shows that National Health Service employees are under pressure from all conceivable quarters. I am sure that the House will want to record its disgust at that violence and the extra

pressure that it creates for staff and patients at Altnagelvin, as it has done in other hospitals in the past.

It gives me no pleasure to state that every aspect of the Health Service, including staff morale, service provision and public confidence, reflects the same depressing reality that a crisis is upon us. Each time the National Health Service in Northern Ireland is examined and debated, we get the same vacuous response from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It amazes me to this day that she repeats the same old rehearsed excuse. How many times have we heard the line that it is the fault of the Tories?

It is almost as if the last five years of new Labour had not happened. We cannot continue to blame the Conservative party for all our woes. We must look closer to home for some of the blame. We have to face up to the fact that a local Minister has been in charge of health for approximately three years, but rather than there being even a slight improvement, things are getting worse than they ever were under direct rule.

Under direct rule we made the justifiable complaint that unaccountable Ministers were making decisions without consultation. However, we now have a local Minister who has consultations but who never makes any decisions. That must be addressed if we are going to stymie and turn around the decline in the Health Service. At present the Health Service is rudderless — it has neither direction nor any real strategic plan. The Department of Health has spent the vast bulk of its time reviewing the problems with the Health Service while delivering little guidance on how to move forward effectively. The Department, it appears, is permanently in review.

I noted with interest the Minister's article in last Thursday evening's edition of the 'Belfast Telegraph'. She mentioned at least four reviews and strategies that have been commissioned by the Department of Health — the acute hospital review, the cardiac surgery review, the comprehensive review of health and social services workforce planning and the preparation of a regional strategy. While those areas need serious attention, one cannot help but feel that the Department and, in particular, the Minister are hiding behind continual reviews instead of bringing before the Assembly a firm and attainable blueprint of the way forward for the National Health Service.

Much has been made of the lack of adequate funding for the Health Service in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the word "underfunding" will be mentioned many times today. Such is the importance of funding, or rather the lack of it, that I have personally raised this issue on numerous occasions, both within and outside the Chamber. The disproportionate and unfair nature of the Northern Ireland health budget, compared to that of our counterparts in the rest of the UK, is such

that only the term "second class" befits the way in which the British Government treat us.

Northern Ireland has higher levels of need and demand than our English counterparts. We need to bear in mind the expenditure that is lost to the Health Service as a result of paramilitary punishment beatings and shootings. Those broken bodies require emergency treatment, months of nursing care and, in many instances, rehabilitation. Just think what we could have done with the millions of pounds that have had to be set aside because of that unacceptable behaviour.

We expected that funding would be, at least, matched with the rest of the United Kingdom. However, not only do we get less, but future increases show that we receive demonstrably lower funding allocations than England. If we were to receive the same rate of increase as England over the next few years, we would see the striking disparity between Northern Ireland and England. Had we matched their rate, we would have gained £83 million last year, £138 million on top of the draft Budget proposals for 2002-03 and £214 million more than the indicative allocation for 2003-04.

Northern Ireland is desperately underfunded by comparison with England and Wales. If our Health Service is to turn the corner, we must have fair, proportionate and immediate financing of the service in Northern Ireland. Moreover, it is vital that the money that is currently apportioned to health here be wisely used. The Health Minister has a budget of over £2 billion. That is a good deal of money, but various interested parties have rightly queried whether that money is being used to best effect. The Assembly must address that.

Areas of the Health Service are being dangerously ignored. There is no mention in the 2002-03 Budget of the proposed new cancer hospital at the Belfast City Hospital site. We ignore the issue of cancer at our peril; we need to bear in mind that cancer will overtake heart disease as the number one killer in the UK in the next few years. Therefore, I call on the Minister to pull out every stop to ensure that funding is secured for this centre of excellence for the treatment of all variants of this dreadful disease. Last year, 31% of eligible women had not had a cervical screening test in the previous five years, and 28% of women aged between 50 and 64 had not had a breast screening test in the previous three years.

If we had had that additional money, proper health promotion campaigns could have educated our people, and many more lives could have been saved. Currently, cancer patients often have to wait too long to see a specialist: this delays diagnosis and treatment, causing anxiety and distress. Often people have no choice but to travel to Belfast for treatment instead of being treated locally, and this adds to their stress.

The absence of haematologists in the Western Board area forces patients to travel to Belfast. Last year's resignation of a radiologist at Antrim Hospital caused delays in diagnosis. Attracting and keeping qualified staff remains difficult. Better financial support across the service would benefit many needy people.

Surely it is time for a radical overhaul of the direction that is being taken by the Department and its Minister. Members would agree that after three years in the post, the Minister must do more than say "I know what must be done" — of course, I refer to the title of her article in the 'Belfast Telegraph'. It is not good enough that she should merely admit that she knows what has to be done. People in Northern Ireland demand to know what will be done, and when.

Members are fully aware of the seriousness of the crisis. One does not have to be a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety to encounter health issues. Members in my party receive, day and daily, complaints and queries by letter, phone or in person about the state of the Health Service. In my constituency of Strangford, I have seen, more often than I care to remember, the frequent problems and deadly effects of the growing burden on the service.

Some Members may have read in the 'News Letter' recently the terribly sad and disturbing story of a disabled constituent of mine who suffered from numerous illnesses. His wife and son are also registered as disabled. In October my constituent became sick — to such a degree that his family called for an ambulance, which took him to a local hospital. He was told that it was just his arthritis acting up and was sent home without further treatment. Over the next four weeks his condition worsened and on numerous occasions he begged to be taken into hospital for proper treatment. During the following weeks he was taken to hospital a further seven times by ambulance, and each time he was sent home. Such was his pain that the poor gentleman had to sleep sitting up at night because he felt suffocated when he lay down.

A local community worker came to hear about his situation and advised him to go immediately to the hospital and demand a more thorough examination. He did this on Tuesday 6 November. On the same day, after numerous tests, he was told that he had no more than 24 hours to live. Tragically, the gentleman died the following day. His family are now left without a husband or father, all because of the pressure on staff and the lack of time to deal with him adequately. That tragedy symbolises all that is going wrong with our Health Service today.

Many Members could probably relate as sad a story. I spoke recently to a radiologist from Belvoir Park Hospital who informed me that the machinery had broken down, yet again. That resulted in the cancellation of appoint-

ments and a backlog of patients who did not receive their treatment. In some instances seriously ill patients have been sent home from hospital due to the pressures on the system.

The words of Dr Peter Maguire reflect a sad reality

"We are on the road to nowhere. The Health Service is in tatters, and we must get our act together."

These words are an accurate description of the state of our Health Service. In getting our act together, the Minister must tackle the issues that strongly affect public confidence. One such example is the offer of an MRI scanner to Belvoir Park Hospital by the Friends of Montgomery House. That offer must be accepted, as to do otherwise would be criminal. I ask the Minister to undertake to find the necessary running costs to ensure the maximum use of this scanner by the patients at Belvoir Park Hospital. She must recognise that her framework on waiting lists has failed to deliver.

2.15 pm

The Minister's review of acute services has run into the sidings and is far too costly. Her plan to abolish GP fundholding seems to have more to do with politics than patients. One has to ask who will be the losers from the lack of an appropriate scheme that would take account of the advantages gained through GP fundholding.

The Minister was advised in the House that if circumstances such as an epidemic of the flu virus arose, the Health Service would face chaos. That did happen, and over 100 beds in four hospitals had to close because of a viral gastro-enteritis bug. As a result, the waiting time in Craigavon Area Hospital was 36 hours, and non-emergency surgery had to be cancelled. Such problems are arising across the Province, and those waiting to be admitted to hospitals are being told that emergency-only treatment is available. I wait with interest to see how many patients were waiting to be admitted to hospital at the end of December 2001 — those figures are not yet available.

In the light of the situation, the Minister needs to act in the following ways. First, it is time that the Minister listened to and respected the views of the Assembly's Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. She has failed to do that so far. It is time that she laid aside her own politicking and concentrated on health matters. Next, she needs to lay before the Assembly a commonsensical and realistic blueprint that will reflect the concerns of Members and the public. A firm grip needs to be taken on the £2 billion that is being spent by her Department. Instead of attacking the trusts, the Minister needs to get her Department into shape, and if that means downsizing and streamlining it, so be it.

The Minister needs to take a serious look at the number of boards and trusts and take the necessary steps to reduce their number. She needs to bring her recommendations to the Assembly's Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety with a view to getting an agreeable working plan that will allow real money to be released to the Health Service. It is time that the number of administrative bodies and quangos were cut, so that money could be released to front-line medical services. It is only when the Minister and her Department resolve to tackle the issues in a determined manner that we will be able to build a better service. The current crisis will deepen if these issues are not tackled. Elected representatives cannot stand idly by and allow that to happen. We owe it to Health Service staff and to the patients across the Province to build a strong and durable health system. I call upon the Minister and her Department to provide vision and leadership to achieve that goal. If that necessary leadership is lacking, they will be judged accordingly.

There is much to be proud of in our National Health Service — many good and dedicated people make the best of a bad situation to provide a caring service. Members will agree that a root-and-branch change to the current set-up is vital for everyone's sake in Northern Ireland.

I call upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and her Colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel to seek an immediate meeting with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr Gordon Brown, and press him for equality of funding for Northern Ireland. It is no longer acceptable that this country should continue to be treated less favourably than other areas of the UK. Just imagine the service that we could have if there were agreement on its future direction, and the means of achieving that goal, and if proper and adequate funding were found to finance it.

I urge Members not to allow the debate to become yet another in a long line of health debates. If we do not act now, who knows what the service will be like when the next debate is heard. I strongly urge Members to support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I welcome this important debate, which has been initiated by Mrs Iris Robinson. Prior to making my main comments I will mention the money for the MRI scanner for Montgomery House. I have written to Mrs Christine Lynch about that scanner and about the fantastic work that is being carried out, and I hope that the Minister can find the funding for it. I appreciate the fact that the Minister is present for the debate.

The chaos in the Health Service cannot go on indefinitely. Patients waiting on trolleys and the war-like zones in our major accident and emergency depart-

ments have to be sorted out. Patients are not cattle, to be cast aside until beds become available. The magnificent hospital staff, the doctors, nurses and allied workers, can no longer be taken for granted. "Meltdown" would be the appropriate word to describe the state of the Health Service if it were not for the dedication and resilience of the front-line workers, who are tired, frustrated, overworked, underpaid and whose perception is that they are undervalued.

My colleagues on the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and I have visited several accident and emergency departments to see conditions at the coalface of health delivery. The Minister, Ms de Brún, has inherited a situation in which the health status of the population is one of the worst in Western Europe. Although over 41% of the Budget goes to the Health Service, there is still considerable underfunding here by comparison with England, Scotland, Wales and other countries in Western Europe.

There is a crisis in orthopaedic and cardiac surgery. The level of staffing and facilities available for trauma and orthopaedic services here is the lowest of any NHS region in the UK. Waiting times for the treatment of fractures are appallingly long. Some people have had to wait for a week for treatment of fractures of the neck or the femur. When I was a medical student I was taught that such fractures required emergency treatment within 24 hours.

Waiting lists are growing. The latest figure was that 56,700 people are awaiting treatment. Recently, I was in Craigavon Hospital, as were several colleagues, and I watched young professionals and others work on the front line. Although there is a major problem with funding, I got the feeling that there ought to be more co-ordination of services between boards and trusts. Therefore, last Wednesday I proposed to the Committee the immediate establishment of an emergency task force, representative of doctors and nurses who work in the accident and emergency departments of our main hospitals, and senior administrators. I am pleased to say that the proposal was carried unanimously.

Members will note that I have called this a "task force" — not a review that will go on indefinitely. The task force will encourage a collaborative approach to accident and emergency services at operational level. It will join together the experience of key clinicians and senior nurses working in the acute hospital front-line service. It will produce its initial report within weeks.

There is a clear need for close work at operational level and for integrated planning at strategic level. There must be a more meaningful co-ordination of emergency services across the four boards and the relevant trusts. I could cite many examples, but I want to concentrate on two of them. First, the Causeway Hospital sometimes buys services from the Eastern

Health and Social Services Board, when, perhaps, it could buy from the Western Board, which is not under the same pressure. Secondly, beds are sometimes available at Daisy Hill Hospital in the Southern Board, while Craigavon Hospital is bulging at the seams. There may be reasons for that that I am not aware of, but those facts were pointed out to me.

The current day take-in system between the City Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital should be replaced as soon as possible by a system of continuous take-in for general emergencies. There is great sympathy towards that idea in both hospitals. The Eastern Board, if not the Minister, should implement that. Each hospital should receive admissions from its local population and only those emergencies that require the specialist services provided only by the staff of each hospital.

Capacity issues must be addressed urgently. Priority should be given to hospitals that are consistently unable to provide enough beds for the general emergency treatment of local populations. For example, there have been great pressures on the Ulster Hospital and the Mater Hospital. The ability of hospitals to cope with emergency admissions depends on the ability of their primary care and community services to avoid unnecessary admissions and ensure timely discharge. However, the Minister is about to impose new structures on primary care. On 1 April 2002, the system of GP fundholding will be replaced by local health and social care groups. It is important to note that 90% of healthcare is delivered at the primary care level. Primary healthcare is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. A year ago, on behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I successfully introduced an amendment on the continuation of GP fundholding in an effort to ensure a seamless transition to the new structures of primary care. That seamless transfer has not taken place.

The new groups will be committees of the boards. Instead of moving towards a primary care-led Health Service, as was envisaged by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, we are merely giving more power to the boards. We are going to get a top-down rather than a bottom-up Health Service. A golden opportunity to give the long-suffering people of Northern Ireland the first stage of a top-class Health Service is being missed. The British Medical Association has been making that point about primary care for some time — this is a golden opportunity, if we have not already missed it. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get primary care right. Primary care is the base of the triangle. If you cannot get primary care right, you cannot get other services right — in particular, secondary care and hospitals. We want to deliver a robust, patient-focused, responsive and truly integrated service to local communities, in which the patients come first. However, it seems that we are introducing, instead, another layer of bureaucracy under the control of the boards.

I appreciate that this is a complex subject. I am not in the business of “bashing” the Minister or anyone else. However, I am in the business of doing my work as the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. As someone with long experience of primary care, I believe that what is proposed for 1 April 2002 will cause massive problems across Northern Ireland. Health professionals say that to me. The Minister recently met regularly with many people, such as Dr Brian Patterson, the chairperson of the General Practitioners’ Committee (NI) of the British Medical Association.

To ensure success, primary care groups should be driven from the bottom-up. Primary and secondary care services are independent, though neither can be looked at in isolation, as Maurice Hayes pointed out. His remit was acute hospitals. However, the Committee persuaded him to examine primary care also, because you cannot consider one without the other. The British Medical Association has sent to all Members a circular in which it makes some points about primary care. It says:

“It is important that proper foundations are laid at the beginning if not to miss a major opportunity to create the most effective primary care system, which would complement and help alleviate the pressures in secondary care services.”

Significant extra funding must accompany a new integrated, collaborative approach to healthcare provision, if we are to bring about the necessary improvements across the community and hospital settings. Northern Ireland has higher levels of deprivation than Great Britain. However, historically, it has received lower funding for health services. During the 1990s, while expenditure on health and social services in Northern Ireland grew by 35% in real terms, the growth in England amounted to 57%. The figures from the comprehensive spending review for 2001-02/2003-04 highlight a deteriorating situation. Given Northern Ireland’s well-documented poverty and historical lack of investment in health, it is unacceptable that it should not enjoy at least a pro-rata increase in line with that in Great Britain.

We have an opportunity to get primary care right. The people of Northern Ireland deserve the very best, and that is what they should get.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Many Members wish to speak. Each Member will have eight minutes.

Rev Robert Coulter: I too support the motion and am glad of the opportunity to pay tribute, as Mrs Iris Robinson did, to the loyalty, dedication and professionalism of those who work in all levels of the Health Service.

The Chairperson of the Health Committee outlined the complexity of the problem. There can be no quick fix for it. As I said yesterday, it will take the very best co-operation among us all to look at the situation and

to work together. We should not try to score any points at any level for ourselves. Rather, we should look at the tremendous problem in the Health Service and work together to rectify it.

The debate gives us the opportunity to express the concerns of those who are worried about the situation, particularly those who are on waiting lists, those who are waiting to see a consultant and those who are beginning to lose hope that, when they are called, it will be in time to do anything about their problems.

One can only begin to imagine the concerns in the mind of someone who has been told that he needs a critical cardiac operation immediately, only to be told by a consultant that the operation cannot be performed for another year or 18 months. His family are concerned about his condition. He rises every morning wondering whether it will be his last day on earth. He is waiting for a message to come, but he knows that it will not come in the immediate future.

Similarly, one can only imagine how someone with a cancerous tumour feels when he is told that he cannot have an operation for many months. As Members of this House, we must take that situation on board. We must critically examine the system wherein people are unable to have the treatment that they long for and require.

The problem is not centred on hospitals alone. When Dr Hayes began to consider his brief, we told him that the problem of acute hospitals could not be viewed in isolation — the entire system must be looked at. I am glad that Dr Hendron pointed out that if we do not get primary care right, then every other part of the system will be wrong.

Without repeating the eloquent comments made by the Members who have spoken, several points must be made. There should be directed finance at the critical points of the Health Service. If finance is not directed, it will become, as I said to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, “confetti currency”. It will blow in the wind and disappear. There will be no way to have accountability. It will not be possible to trace finance through the system.

We should look at the contracts of those who work in the system. Doctors are one example. Hospital start courses for junior doctors are not in line with the take-up for postgraduate doctors. I am told that hospitals will employ doctors only on a one-year contract, because the hospitals must pay for doctors for the first three years. Therefore, after completion of a one-year contract here, doctors go to seek work across the water, in England or elsewhere. If we are to keep our doctors, that system must be changed.

The contracts must be examined. Consultants’ contracts should also be examined. Much of the problem is that people are either waiting to see a consultant or are waiting for the treatment that the consultant has prescribed.

The existing contracts need to be reviewed and revised.

The training of nurses and the retention of nursing staff should also be considered. Recently it was my privilege to attend the graduation ceremony of the nursing faculty at Queen’s University, Belfast. It was impressive. One reason for that was the number of young people who, despite the difficulties in our Health Service, are coming forward to take up a career in that service. However, the stress they will face, the conditions in hospitals and the lack of morale among people already working in the system will result in many of those young people, after a very short time, going elsewhere to pursue their careers.

Buildings are outdated and equipment needs to be updated. But the most debilitating effect on those who work in our health system is caused by the apparent lack of decision by those who control it. I said in a previous debate that decisions are needed in the short term, not more consultations and more blame. If that “mind change” could be achieved — so that instead of blaming one another, each of us could contribute in our own way and could work together to the betterment of our system — decisions could be made in the short term to benefit those who are currently concerned and worried. To be told “Yes, we are consulting” is not much comfort to someone lying on a trolley in a hospital corridor. That person wants action, not words. I support the motion.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is interesting that Assembly Member Iris Robinson chided the Minister for politicising her role. No issue is more politicised, inside or outside the Assembly, than health, and the only reason for that is the Minister’s political position. That is the only reason, and most of the politicisation has been by the Democratic Unionist Party.

Last Friday, an agricultural item on the BBC programme ‘Newsline’ compared our health with that of animals. I objected strenuously to the programme at the time, but I have yet to receive a satisfactory reply from the BBC. Health has been politicised because of the party to which the Minister belongs.

Every party had the opportunity to take the health portfolio when it was offered on the first day on which the Assembly sat. Each party in turn passed the chalice to Sinn Féin, who accepted it. I contend that Sinn Féin, and the Minister, have behaved in a very responsible, progressive and energetic manner in relation to health. She has attempted, despite the backdrop of a lack of financial resources, to address the problems. Unfortunately, the political sniping continues. A similar motion was debated two weeks ago. If that is not recycling and politicisation, I do not know what is.

Dr Maguire met members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and last week its members fulfilled their promise to him when they visited Downe Hospital. It was noticeable that no members of the DUP attended the Committee's meeting with Dr Maguire and the executive of Downe Hospital — so much for their care for Downe Hospital and the extreme circumstances in which it finds itself.

It has been said before that health is an emotive issue — an issue that people play politics with. However, I am not going to play politics with it, nor is my party. We have a genuine concern, given our background as a socialist party, for the welfare of people in our society. We are not here to play the politics of the DUP.

People's health is the central responsibility of the Government. If we have a Government here, they should deal with the critical issues of our time. It is interesting that Assembly Member Iris Robinson said that it is not just a question of funding, yet she wants the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to meet with the British Chancellor of the Exchequer to ask for more.

It is also interesting that, although my Colleague Sue Ramsey and I proposed, in November, that the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety should meet with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, we did not receive a reply until last week — so much for the concern for the financial problems in the Health Service. So great is the Executive's concern that they did not respond, as a collective, to our request for a meeting with them until last week. We are sick and tired of the political sniping over the health of our community — political sniping that extends beyond the Assembly into some areas of the news media as well.

We are talking about the health of the people who live in our community. Health has no sectarian walls or divides because it affects all of us. If a person is sick, it does not matter whether he or she is a Prod or a Taig: everyone requires treatment for his or her illnesses. A fracture requires treatment; cancer requires treatment; and a heart condition requires treatment.

We must work together to form, as Joe Hendron mentioned, a cohesive and collaborative approach to the Health Service. It is wrong for people to sit on the sidelines, not participating in the Executive, still wanting the largesse of the Assembly and the largesse from the Good Friday Agreement, but ignoring their responsibilities to the Good Friday Agreement. Those people have little room to talk about the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, or any other Department, given the disgraceful attitude of their party to the Executive and their neglect of the Executive and the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr J Kelly: When we stand up, you people refuse to give way, so I will not give way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to address his points through the Chair.

Mr Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is the Member addressing the motion? I would like you to rule on that because he does not seem to be doing so. He seems to be on a political rant, and it is neither the time nor the place for that.

Mr J Kelly: They do not like the message, so they want to shoot the messenger. I suppose that it is not the first time that they have shot messengers.

As Dr Hendron said, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has attempted to address the issue of health, with whatever ability we have, in a non-partisan way. The Committee has visited most of the hospitals in the Six Counties. We have met staff from all areas of the medical profession — midwives, nurses, consultants, junior doctors, and members of the British Medical Association (BMA). The underlying problem, according to them, is the lack of funding in the Health Service. There is no escaping that fact — however much others may wish to cover it up with calls for inquiries about where money went in the past. The Health Service needs funding, not only for crisis management but also for a health strategy. The Health Service needs a strategy that goes beyond the present crisis into next year, and the year after, and so on.

2.45 pm

Members have talked about the Chancellor of the Exchequer: Gordon Brown himself said that the Health Service in England, Scotland and Wales had suffered 50 years of neglect. Charlie McCreevy, the Minister for Finance in the Twenty-six Counties also said that there was a shortage of funding. I call on the Executive to make the health of our people their number one priority — *[Interruption]*. You sit down. You cannot stand up.

Mr McCarthy: Mr Deputy Speaker, you have asked Members to limit their speeches to eight minutes. I could spend 108 minutes on the subject. It has all been said before, so I will be as brief and to the point as possible.

The Health Service is in crisis. It has been in crisis for a long time — since before Bairbre de Brún came on the scene. Many people are suffering unnecessarily, which is disgraceful and totally unacceptable. The crisis in the Health Service exists across the whole range of health provision. There is a lack of hospital beds; a lack of services for patients who suffer from a vast range of complaints; a lack of outpatient facilities; problems with regular and emergency treatment; and a shortfall in the provision of good quality care in the

community. Vital drugs, which could improve the quality of life, are withheld, and the latest digital hearing aids, which could make such a difference to people with hearing disabilities, are still not provided free, despite the fact that Minister de Brún has asked for funding for that provision.

The crisis in the Health Service was fully debated just before Christmas. The Assembly and the Executive have now agreed that health is the number one priority, which, in itself, is progress.

Ms Ramsey: I accept that the Executive and the Assembly have agreed that health is the number one priority. However, that was not reflected in the December monitoring round, when only £7.8 million was allocated to health.

Mr McCarthy: I accept what Ms Ramsey says, and I hope that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will take that on board.

Before Christmas, we fully discussed the lack of provision in the Health Service. The pressure to greatly improve services must continue. Members must continue to put pressure on. I appeal to all Members to forget about who is to blame. Now is the time for us all to band together, as Rev Robert Coulter has already said. We must work together to get the best possible services from the resources that we have, to give everyone decent quality healthcare — maternity care, primary care, hospital care and community care. Free nursing and personal care must also be provided. In that way, everyone can be assured of a quality health service from the cradle to the grave.

I welcome the extra money that was allocated to health this morning. It is not nearly enough, but let us hope that it will be used wisely for the benefit of everyone.

Mr Watson: I support the motion, and I pay tribute to staff in the Health Service for their continued professionalism and devotion to duty. Once again we are discussing the serious situation in our Health Service — a service which has been thrown into further crisis.

I do not share the views of some Members who think that the issue should be put on the back-burner. This is an important issue that must be kept to the fore at all times until it is finally resolved. The crisis will not go away until we make serious decisions and take effective action to ensure the long-term future of the service and develop mechanisms to cope with the situation.

In the last debate, I raised specific issues about Craigavon Area Hospital Group Trust that have since come home to roost. The cries for help were genuine. They came from staff who have been working under emotional blackmail in the Health Service for many years. The crisis at the Craigavon hospital peaked on

Monday 7 January, when 31 patients were waiting for beds. The situation was highlighted extensively in the media, and while it concentrated on the accident and emergency services, all of the hospital services were under pressure.

The trolley waits have been reduced — yesterday they were down to 17, which is still unacceptable. It is a stark reminder of the lack of capacity in the hospital, which presents an unsafe environment for patients and staff. That must be addressed. All medical, nursing, administrative, portering and domestic staff have worked, and continue to work, extremely hard in difficult circumstances to ensure that a high quality of care is maintained for all patients.

There are currently 433 beds in Craigavon Area Hospital Group Trust. In 1993, there were around 600 beds across the trust, and about 200 in South Tyrone hospital. In the same year, the numbers of patients treated were as follows: 21,000 inpatients; 76,000 outpatients; 36,500 accident and emergency attendances; and 2,138 deliveries. In 2000-01, there was a 23% increase in the number of patients treated. The total numbers treated were as follows: 25,886 inpatients; 130,161 outpatients, representing a 71% increase; 70,815 accident and emergency attendances, representing a 94% increase; and 2,567 deliveries, representing a 20% increase.

The increase in workload and the corresponding reduction in beds reflects the ability of staff to provide a high level of care in a rapidly changing environment. The Craigavon Area Hospital Group Trust is discussing a 10-year strategic plan with the Southern Health and Social Services Board and the Department. I urge the Minister to make a long-term commitment to, and investment in, Craigavon hospital, which plays a vital role in the delivery of acute hospital care in the south of the Province.

Bed-capacity problems are evident across the Province, as the main hospitals do not have the beds, the staff or the resources to deal with the number of patients currently requiring treatment, which results in long and growing waiting lists. The main hospitals in Northern Ireland have the biggest demand for services. Sadly, only about 10% of the work in Craigavon hospital is elective or planned surgery. That figure is being reviewed weekly, with the trust carrying out as much urgent elective work as possible. However, some of the smaller hospitals have less demand for services and much shorter waiting lists. The pressure remains on the acute hospitals, and the problem has been well documented. The Minister must acknowledge that, with the limited capacity in hospitals, the necessary emergency work must go ahead as a priority, and other ways must be found to manage the planned work, and reduce the unacceptably long waiting lists. Many of my constituents would be more than happy to travel some distance to receive elective surgery at other

hospitals that have the necessary capacity, rather than remain on the waiting list for Craigmavon hospital.

A review of how elective work is managed across Northern Ireland is urgently needed so that the workload can be spread more evenly across all hospitals in the Province. Surely it is time for a closer working relationship to be forged between the management teams of various hospitals to ease the inequalities in access to the Health Service.

We all know that the Health Service has been blighted by bad publicity. There are difficulties in recruiting medical and nursing staff, and many experienced staff are leaving because of low morale and lack of job satisfaction. That impacts on those who remain, and makes it difficult to sustain even the present levels of care. That needs to be addressed urgently if safe care and quality of care are to be maintained and improved.

It was welcome to hear the Finance Minister announcing an additional £7.8 million today on top of the £8 million that has already been allocated. However, there is no use throwing money at the Health Service during the year, because that is not a solution to the problem. We need significant long-term investment, and it must be equitably distributed across the Province. The Health Service must be properly resourced; managers need to know the level of available resources so that services can be properly planned, run and maintained. The Hayes review of acute services points the way forward for acute hospital care in Northern Ireland. Serious consultation and decisions on the future configuration of hospitals must be a priority for the Assembly.

This problem affects all our people, irrespective of class or creed. It is far too serious an issue for political point-scoring. It is time that the Assembly stood together and got this problem resolved once and for all. This crisis is not acceptable, and the Health Service needs urgent, decisive action. I support the motion.

Mr Morrow: I too support the motion. The concern being expressed outside conveys the message to us all that all is not well in the Health Service. I suspect that during the Minister's deliberations she will again remind the House that, in some way, the problem is not of her making. The continual distancing of herself and her Department from the problem washes very lightly with the general public. Whether it is of her making or not, the bottom line is that it is her problem and her responsibility. It is difficult to understand why we seem to be going from one crisis to another. If this were happening in a modern company, something drastic would be done.

One of the most fundamental and basic rights of any individual is access to a good healthcare system. However, it appears that when it is the Health Service, there seems to be a degree of complacency, indifference and, at times, neglect, to say the very least — I am

trying to be kind. Some might find those words a bit sharp, but I did not create the perception. The perception out there is that no one seems to really care. It is the Minister's responsibility to sit down with her officials and work out a resolution to the crisis in our healthcare system.

Every possible index of the state of the Health Service shows one thing; one word could sum it up — deterioration. From waiting lists to the hours worked by junior doctors, there is a continual deterioration. We, as Assembly Members and public representatives, demand to know why it is that way. The Minister continually tells us that the Tories did all this, and that it is of their making. My understanding is that the Tories are long gone, and some even say that they have been forgotten about. Others have made the bold statement that they will never be back. Who are we going to blame then? Has Labour not had a term of office? Has Bairbre de Brún not had a term of office? "No blame at all to me" she says — and, like Pilate, washes her hands.

3.00 pm

During direct rule, the cry was always made, "If we had a local Administration, we would make things different. We would make them hum. We would have a Health Service that was second to none, and we would make every citizen proud of the fact that local people had their hands on the local issues." Is that happening today?

Mr Weir: To be fair, would the Member not agree that the situation is different? Since the Minister took over, things have got worse.

Mr Morrow: Sadly, that is true. Things are steadily getting worse, and soon they will be out of control. Without the professionalism of the doctors, the nurses — and the ancillary staff, I hasten to add — there would be chaos. The Department's managers and the Minister must take note. They cannot continually stand up like Pilate and say "Not our responsibility. We are not the guilty people."

The Minister has approximately 40% of the block grant at her disposal. She may say that that is not enough, and that may be true in some cases. However, if the Minister had enough money tomorrow, would she have a blueprint and a plan to put before the Assembly, the doctors and, more importantly, the patients in Northern Ireland? Has she got that blueprint to demonstrate in unambiguous terms that she is in charge of the situation? She will have to do better than she has been doing, because she convinces nobody. Whether or not the situation is of her making, she must stand up and say "Look, this is my job. This is my responsibility. I am concerned."

The Minister's continued running away from the crisis in her Health Service will not wash any longer. It may be a nice, convenient fig leaf to hide behind to say that the problem is somebody else's. It is the Minister's problem. She may not want it, and Mr John Kelly argued that anybody else could have had the Health portfolio. Well, nobody else has it. His party has it. He then boldly said that his party are socialists, yet they leave patients lying in wards, on trolleys and in corridors.

If the Conservatives did that, I hasten to add, those socialists would be standing outside every hospital with their placards. However, they are not doing that, because the birds have come home to roost, and now that it is their responsibility they do not like it one little bit. They do not like criticism, but a Minister should not be so gutless as to be unable to take criticism. Let the Minister stand up and take the criticism, and never mind the yobbo behind her who seems to be more interested in going down for a political rant. Some of us are very sincere about this.

I recently visited Craigavon Area Hospital at the invitation of Dr Maguire, and I saw at first hand what was happening there. When the Minister and her officials decided to close South Tyrone Hospital, they were warned that Craigavon Area Hospital could not cope, because it was already at 90% capacity. What were we told? "You do not know what you are talking about. We can cope. We can sort it." Are they sorting it? Tragically, they are not. Patients are being left for hours on end simply because of the overload that has come as a result of the closure of South Tyrone Hospital.

I ask the Minister to retrace her steps, reopen South Tyrone Hospital, especially given the current crisis. Let her demonstrate that she does care and that she is concerned. Then she will start to convince people that she has the stomach for the job that she is in.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr Gallagher): I welcome the opportunity to discuss the recent health crisis. The public, who have witnessed the dreadful scenes in our hospitals in recent weeks and years want to see and hear about solutions. That also goes for the patients whom we saw on trolleys, for their distressed families — some of whom we saw interviewed — and for the harassed doctors, nurses and other health workers involved. The public do not wish to see an acrimonious debate in the Chamber, or attempts by individuals or parties to push around the blame.

The public know that there is a solution. They know that what needs fixing comes down to two issues — funding and management. It is as simple as that. As I said yesterday, in the past decade we have lost out in comparison to Britain by around £30 million or £33 million a year, yet its Health Service is in a beleaguered

state. We must bear that in mind and figure out where we stand.

The funding issue requires a three-pronged approach. First, as has been pointed out, this Assembly must press the Treasury to make up some of the funding shortfall. Secondly, our Executive must take on board our key service's priorities. At that level, additional money has been set aside for health and, already this year, approximately an extra £20 million has been directed towards our Health Service. It is encouraging to see that the Executive have some recognition of the problem.

Thirdly, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety — and I am sure that other members of that Committee agree with me — relies on the Minister to make the case for more funding. We support the Minister. When we receive correspondence from the Committee for Finance and Personnel, we make our case. When we receive officials from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, we make the case again.

The other issue concerns management. Everyone knows that executives in the Health Service are highly paid, and some are not doing a good job. We have seen that they are repeating past mistakes. In the light of the scenes that we witnessed in recent weeks, it is time that they were brought into line. That is an issue for the Minister and her Department, and it is one on which I wish to see action taken.

General planning in the Health Service could also be addressed in the short term. Last week, I visited the South Tyrone Hospital in Dungannon where I saw the empty wards. The accident and emergency department is open nine to five, five days a week. If that service alone were open from nine in the morning until 10 at night, seven days a week, less pressure would be placed on Craigavon Hospital. The public understand that; it is common sense. Our managers must be pulled into line about such issues.

We also need a decision on the Hayes Report so that we can get a plan in place and into people's heads.

Wide consultation has taken place. An independent and representative body was set up, which consulted in this country and beyond, and made recommendations. I hope that we will not be going into further consultation. The doctors and the hospitals realise that in the meantime, with the uncertainty that is generated, services are falling through the floor. They say that it cannot wait, and I agree.

We heard outside the Chamber that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, through their offices, refused to meet the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and that that has something to do with this problem. I do not agree with that view. There are lines of procedure: we have the Committee,

the Minister, and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and we should abide by those lines. Members of the Health Committee back the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in making her case, and the Committee expects the Minister to argue that case at Executive level.

I will not argue that the Committee should bypass the Minister and go directly to the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister when it suits it. Regardless of what Committee I am on — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I will not give way. To bypass the Minister is to undermine her. I do not understand why I am hearing that argument from individuals who belong to the Minister's party, and I would like that matter clarified. Do they want to bypass their own Minister or do they not?

Ms Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I will not give way. I have outlined how we should approach the issues of funding and management clearly and consistently.

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Did the Member support the call for the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to meet with the Health Committee?

Mr Gallagher: I supported the Chairperson's exploration of that concept, and I am on record in the Committee as doing so.

We have an Assembly that people have long sought, and there are procedures and ways of doing business. Let us all get behind those who are in key positions. We all have a responsibility to the public to deliver a proper and efficient Health Service and one that serves them well.

Mr McFarland: We have heard a fair old tale of woe from around the Chamber. The Department must know by now that there is a crisis. The difficulty is that I cannot envisage action of any great detail to sort out the problems. Does the Department know where the choke points are? Where are the problems in the Health Service? On the one hand, £2.5 billion is going in at the top end, and on the other, patients on trolleys and overworked staff exist at the sharp end. That would indicate to any objective observer that something is wrong.

The Health Committee tried to find out where the problems are. It examined the Health Service accounts to try to identify where the money was going and to track it down through the system. That was not possible. It tried to follow the audit trail, but, sure enough, the moment it got there the Department changed the headings, so it was impossible to identify where the money coming in at the top had worked itself out at the bottom. That remains to be the case.

If this were a commercial business, the managing director and the board of directors would have been sacked long ago. In its lack of clear action to deal with the problem, the Department reminds me of the old Soviet politburo, which was unwilling to countenance any change to, or any interference in, its affairs. It will review, consult, consult again, but do nothing.

3.15 pm

The Department has a very bad relationship with the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It has been an unhelpful and reluctant colleague, unlike many other Departments' relationships with Assembly Committees. It has adopted an arrogant attitude towards the Assembly. Members will have noticed the concern expressed in a recent report by the Public Accounts Committee about a reply it received from the Department of Health. In its reply to a comment made by the Public Accounts Committee that highlighted a departmental wrongdoing, the Department stated that it did not accept the comments. That Committee is the most powerful one in the Assembly. My colleagues in the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety will bear that out.

We need to re-examine the present situation. Let us look at primary care. The Committee Chairperson talked about the looming chaos, and why, last year, we gave the Minister and the Department a year's grace to sort itself out and to ease in a better, simpler GP fundholding system. There has not been a dicky bird. There has been no movement, and what was brought before us last year has reappeared. I am concerned about the Department's attitude.

We have heard about patients waiting on trolleys in hospitals. The Hayes Report stated that 80% of patients in accident and emergency departments should not be there; they would be better dealt with in a primary care situation. Those who live near hospitals use them like a medical centre. We have known that for a long time. What action has been taken to clear the primary care patients out of hospitals, where they are gumming up the works, to allow the hospitals to function properly? There has been no mention of it at all. We heard yesterday about the amazing state of affairs in community care, which is gumming up hospitals from the other end.

Staff on the ground will say privately that the problem is as much a management one as it is a financial one. Health Service staff know where the problems lie, but they are not allowed to initiate change. They fear for their jobs and the system above them that will not countenance change. They are not empowered to implement changes that they know would improve the hospitals.

The Department of Health and the hospital managers need to remind themselves of the purpose of the Health Service. It is not an employment agency, nor is it a system that sits still. It is there for the benefit of

patients. However, the patients will say that they do not believe that the present system works for their benefit. That cannot be right. We need leadership from the Department and the Minister and better management in the hospitals.

I urge the Minister to lead a drive to slim down bureaucracy in the boards and trusts. She must encourage managers to empower their staff to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our hospitals. Then, perhaps, if the Department can identify where the money that the Assembly directs into the Health Service is going, we shall be confident that the Department of Health is effective and is hitting the target. I support the motion.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I find it a little difficult to hear you, Ms Ramsey. Will you speak towards the Chair?

Ms Ramsey: John Kelly started the debate as a consultant, but I am only a junior doctor. I will not take a hard run at him.

The most recent Assembly motion, as amended, on the Health Service urged the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

“to take urgent action to tackle the current crisis in the Health Service, particularly in view of impending additional winter pressures, and calls on the Executive to make the necessary resources available to alleviate pressures throughout the Health Service.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 13, p387*].

That debate took place on 11 December 2001; it was the last debate before the Christmas recess. My Colleague John Kelly and I tabled an amendment to that motion calling on the Executive to provide additional money. We are both aware that there are pressures not only on the acute sector but throughout the Health Service — from community care to mental health, from services for the elderly to those for young people. We discussed the situation during the debate on 11 December 2001 and in a debate on care in the community on 21 January 2002. On 11 December 2001 all parties agreed to call on the Executive to provide additional money to target pressures in the service as a whole.

It is regrettable that Tommy Gallagher has just left the Chamber, because he sought clarification on a point. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety wrote to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on 16 November 2001 because it was aware that we would face a crisis in the service — in dealing with winter pressures, et cetera. We requested a meeting to discuss the years of underfunding of the service. Mr Gallagher states that he agrees with the decision by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister not to meet with the Committee because he would see that as sidestepping, or bypassing, the Minister. However, the

Minister wrote to the Committee to welcome its approach, because Committee members were going to support her bids. The Committee was visiting hospitals, and it witnessed the problems there. Its intention was to support the Minister's bids to the Executive.

I hope that Mr Gallagher reads my clarification in the Official Report. In my view the SDLP has now pulled back because the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister does not want to meet with the Committee. Who is playing politics now?

The Chairperson of the Committee wrote to the other Ministers about the problems faced by the Health Service. One of the proposers of today's motion, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, is the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. Following on from Dr Hendron's letter, would Rev Dr Ian Paisley and his Committee allow some of its Department's budget to go towards alleviating some of the serious problems in the Health Service? It would be silly not to welcome the additional money that has been given to the health sector. However, it is non-recurrent funding.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel today stated that the health sector faces real problems. Some Members said that health is one of the most talked about topics in the Assembly. However, the Department received a less than 10% increase in its budget in the December monitoring round. I must stress that that money is non-recurrent. One cannot talk about a three-, five-, or 10-year plan when the money received is only year-on-year and is non-recurrent.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel also said that many people will ask why the Executive are not doing more to target funding in the Health Service. I want to ask that question. We are aware that there is a serious underfunding of the service. Health is a priority in the Programme for Government, but where is that priority when the Executive are talking about money?

As a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I am aware of the problems faced by people working in the front line. I send my thanks to them, because they sometimes work in serious conditions. Last week we visited the Downe Hospital, where there are such problems. Staff there do a brilliant job, and we must congratulate them.

I have spoken to several people in the community sector who are concerned that money will be transferred from their funds to support acute services. The acute sector gets the big headlines. The community sector states that that has happened before, that we need to get away from it and that we must take a holistic approach to health rather than taking money away from one part of the service to give to another.

I make no bones about talking about the years of underfunding. Members have stated several times that this is not a funding issue, yet they proceed to attack the Minister. However, they rightly highlight the problems faced in their constituencies: occupational therapy issues; people not getting community-care packages; and people not being able to get access to wheelchairs. Members need to be aware that the funding of trusts is an issue.

Several Members mentioned waiting lists, an issue that I raised during the debate on 11 December 2001. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety looked into non-attendance for hospital appointments, because a percentage of patients do not attend appointments. Waiting lists are growing, so we must ensure that people who have appointments keep them — otherwise they are just extending the lists.

What have the Executive done since the motion on the Health Service crisis was passed on 11 December 2001?

Some Members said that we cannot go on blaming the Tories, who have been out of power for the past five years. When they were in power, the Tories stole £190 million a year from the Health Service — a service that they were against from the start. New Labour are not doing any better, because it is giving us the crumbs from the table while investing in the Health Service in England.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ms Ramsey, thank you for making yourself much more audible to my old ears.

Mr Paisley Jnr: While there are many uncertainties in the Chamber, there are some certainties; one is the way in which some Members react when they are chided. John Kelly is a case in point, given his reaction to crucial health issues raised by my Colleague Mrs Iris Robinson and by Dr Hendron, Mr McFarland and Rev Robert Coulter. One certainty is that when the bait is put into the water, John Kelly always bites. However, he made some interesting points, which are worth repeating and studying when we get the Official Report. He said that the Minister's political position is the problem — those are his words, not mine. Now that there is a realisation of the problem, perhaps they should do something about it. He is the only person in today's debate who has said that he did not want it to take place because it is a recycled one. All that the Member has to do —

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I said that the problem with the Minister was the DUP's problem; not the Minister's problem.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Hansard will show who is being accurate, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We have a serious subject here, and it would be nice if both parties would just get on with that.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Mr Deputy Speaker, you have touched on another certainty about what will and will not happen in the Chamber. Nonetheless, the statement was made that the issue is being recycled. It is clear that if one goes into the wards in Northern Ireland, as many have done, and speaks to patients, relatives, medical, nursing and auxiliary staff, one will find that the problem is not being recycled; it is being renewed every day. It is being repeated in hospitals up, down and across Northern Ireland.

3.30 pm

This blindness, this Pontius Pilate-like washing of the hands of blame is completely unacceptable. For a short period during the debate it appeared that the Minister had, for the want of another word, the moral support of the President of IRA/Sinn Féin standing behind her, but as the debate went on, he abandoned the ship, which appears to be sinking.

Two weeks ago, I had the privilege of shadowing Dr Peter Maguire of the BMA in the Craigavon Area Hospital for ten and a half hours of his 22-hour shift. The invitation to accompany Dr Maguire was extended to the Minister, and I had to accept it, although the Minister should have been there to see the problems at first hand. It appears that the Minister could not look the medical, nursing and auxiliary staff, and the patients and visitors to the hospital, in the eye and tell them that her policies were working. I saw a Health Service not in crisis, but, in the words of Dr Maguire, in "meltdown". People have been running away from that reality, and a holier-than-thou attitude of blaming everyone else is no good. The Health Service is staying together only because the tireless efforts by its staff are holding it together by the seams. Sooner or later that could give way.

Mrs Iris Robinson stated that the Minister should have visited Craigavon Area Hospital, because she should be aware of the situation there. I will remind the House of some of the things she would have seen, had she accepted the invitation. She would have witnessed stressed medical staff, overworked nursing staff, no beds available for patients and patients eligible for care in the community blocking beds. The Minister would have seen people giving their all to the Health Service and being given very little in return. She would have seen agency nurses willing to work as full-time members of staff but not being allowed to do so. In the intensive care ward I witnessed the sad reality of the lack of resources when one person was taken from an intensive care bed, put into a medical chair and told that he would have to be treated from there because the intensive care bed was required for a more urgent case. The patient was given a brass bell and told to ring it when he needed nursing attention.

The Health Service has been brought to that Victorian state, and the Department is blind to that reality. I saw

patients with nowhere to go, their dignity violated by a lack of privacy. I saw a public toilet being used as a ward toilet by patients assigned to trolleys in the corridors. I saw staff having to work their socks off in overcrowded conditions, where the movement of patients became an obstacle course along corridors. One emergency theatre had been turned into a makeshift ward. Perhaps the Minister could not look them in the eye and tell them that her policy was working, because it was not working then.

I am sick of hearing the old excuse — let us blame the Tories. That does not wash anymore. The responsibility is here, and we must ask where the allocated money is going. Each time money has been made available Members of the House have voted more and more resources to the Health Service — up to 40% of the block grant. Is the money not traceable once it goes to the Health Service, or is its impact not delivering the desired result? It is not a question of finance at that point, as some Members seem to think — it is a question of management. Management does not start at the bottom; it starts at the top, with the Minister, where it has failed.

Carmel Hanna, who has now become a Minister herself, said in the 'Belfast Telegraph' that it is no longer possible to blame London for the problems, and I think that that is absolutely right, but you do not have to take a politician's word for it. Take the word of the 'Health Service Journal'.

It said that more money is needed. However, it is not the money that counts; it is the bureaucracy. In fact, it said that the management of the service is escalating the crisis. The 'Belfast Telegraph' article said that there was no point in blaming London for the crisis, because it is a crisis of local management.

On 28 December a 'News Letter' article said that doctors and GPs were calling on the Minister to either do her job or quit. Those people are not members of the DUP, the UUP or the SDLP; they are health professionals. When those people make such remarks, it is time for the Department to buck itself up or else be put out. Until people realise that, the problem will go beyond meltdown.

When the Assembly votes money to health — before Christmas it voted an extra £8 million for waiting lists — it does not appear to have any effect. Many Members have suggested prescription and improvements. However, people must realise that the Minister has failed. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister must recognise that when it is invited to examine a crisis, whether it be foot-and-mouth disease or the problems at Holy Cross Primary School, it has a responsibility to let the people who are up to the job take over and sort the problem out.

Mrs Courtney: The Health Service faces a crisis of confidence. Every day we hear hardship stories of

patients waiting for much-needed surgery. Despite the extra funding since devolution, the situation has deteriorated. For example, the number of patients waiting 18 months or more for elective treatment has jumped by about 700% in four years. Since March 1996, the number of people waiting for outpatient appointments has risen from 59,000 to over 128,000. The total number of people waiting for a hospital bed has risen by almost 10% in the last year. Trusts' deficits more than doubled between 1998-99 and 1999-2000. All that happened despite extra resources.

A 7.2% increase in the budget was announced in October 2000; £17 million was allocated in November 2000; £14.5 million was allocated in January 2001; and £18 million was allocated in February 2001. The budget for 2002-03 will be 37% greater than it was when the Minister took office. That is an increase of £687 million.

The North already spends a higher budget per capita, and a higher percentage of its Budget on acute healthcare than England or the Republic of Ireland. This is proof of the Executive's and the Assembly's commitment to the Health Service. However, the Health Service is about management as well as money. Arguments about the lack of resources should not detract from the need to manage the health budget professionally and to deploy resources efficiently. No matter how much we spend on health, we have a responsibility to ensure good management and accountability for how resources are used. Those lying on trolleys because there are no beds need to know that the money is being spent — if not on a bed for them — on something necessary.

It is over seven months since the Department was allocated £18 million to address trusts' deficits. However, it was not unconditional. The Minister must address the origins and consequences of the deficits. We need answers now. There is concern that some trusts were allowed to run up large deficits, while trusts that managed their budgets well suffered as a consequence. That has nothing to do with the amount of money available to the Department.

In autumn 2000, the framework for action on waiting lists, which was supposed to reduce the waiting list to 48,000, was published, but there is still no report. We need answers to our questions.

Throughout all healthcare facilities there is great disillusionment among staff, including surgeons and medical, nursing, ancillary and ambulance staff. Those people are at the forefront of care. The more hardship headlines they see in the 'Belfast Telegraph' — such as "Elderly woman's 22-hour wait on a trolley" — the more concerned they become, because they must explain to the management why patients were waiting on trolleys.

I agree that funding is critical. However, as the Hayes Report states, while problems can be the result of underfunding, they can also be the result of not using resources efficiently and effectively. It is difficult to argue for additional resources for hospital and community health services, against other national and regional priorities, if it cannot be demonstrated that existing resources are being used to best effect by generally accepted levels of comparison. We need decisions on primary care, on acute care and, above all, on the administration structures in the Health Service. Staff are dealing with day-to-day crises, so they cannot, therefore, give the required time to strategic planning. The Department must take the lead if the situation is to be turned around.

Reference has been made today to the violence at Altnagelvin Hospital during the early hours of Sunday morning. A similar incident occurred three months ago. Security was brought in at that time. Obviously it was not completely effective. How and why that violence occurred is part of the problem. We must ask ourselves why it happened. I believe that it is part of the wider deterioration of community structures. But whatever the reason is, the Assembly needs to take action. We need extra resources for the security that is necessary, if there is not to be a complete breakdown of staff morale. It has got to the stage where the Royal College of Nursing, which is not a militant organisation, is calling for strike action. There is a meeting in Altnagelvin Hospital this evening to discuss the possibility. The call for strike action is the ultimate weapon against the lack of staff security. The matter is critical, and I ask the Minister to make extra funding for the security that Altnagelvin requires a priority.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been allocated an extra £7.8 million in today's December monitoring round. That is in addition to the £8 million that was announced on 3 December 2001. I recognise that there are many demands, such as junior doctors' contracts and consultants' payments, and that there are other pressure such as laboratories, pharmacies and domiciliary care. However, a safe working environment is critical to delivering care. For that reason I ask the Minister to address that problem as a matter of urgency.

Next year's health spending will be some £224 million pounds more than the current year's. However, we must ensure that that money is used to the greatest possible effect — we want staff in accident and emergency departments to feel secure in their work and patients requiring treatment to come into a safe environment. This morning the Minister of Finance and Personnel stated that his Department is to carry out a needs and effectiveness evaluation. That evaluation is necessary to enable us to understand what we are achieving with what we are spending. The Assembly

must restore confidence in the Health Service. In becoming a member of the Health Committee, I hope that I can work constructively for the betterment of the Health Service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There are only a couple of Members left to speak. Please use the time as well as possible, and do not repeat what has already been said.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I do not plan to speak for an hour.

I acknowledge the tremendous difficulties in the Health Service. I also acknowledge the Minister's best efforts to get to grips with, and to plan beyond, the difficulties that she has inherited. I want to add my voice to the call for greater funding for the Health Service — in recognition of, and in response to, historic underfunding. Members agree that it must become the number one priority for the Assembly and the Executive. We must put differences aside in the interest of providing a proper Health Service for everyone's benefit.

To depart from normal practice, I commend Mr Paisley Jnr for his initiative in visiting Craigavon Area Hospital. However, how much more powerful would that initiative have been if he had persuaded his Colleagues, Minister Robinson and Minister Dodds, to sit around the Executive table and add weight to the argument for more funding for the Health Service. That would be more meaningful and would deliver more in the long term.

It is rich to hear a lecture from the Democratic Unionist Party on the Health Service when that party ducked choosing the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when it could have taken it. Sinn Féin had the courage to go for it — in the person of Bairbre de Brún.

The Barnett formula must be reviewed, with the objective of introducing a system that will address years of chronic underfunding. I speak from the perspective of Fermanagh and Tyrone. The Minister has met delegations from many hospitals and campaign groups that expressed people's concerns and fears about the Hayes review — not least from the two counties that I mentioned. I ask the Minister to ensure the maintenance, where possible, of existing services at both the Tyrone County Hospital and the Erne Hospital, and the expansion of services where necessary. People in Fermanagh and Tyrone fear a running down and destabilising of existing services in such a way that one might easily slip over to the other. I ask for a bridge to the future to be built with regard to both those hospitals. I also ask the Minister to listen to the consultants and various campaigners whom she met recently.

3.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: You were very frugal with the amount of time that you used, Mr McElduff. I appreciate that.

Ms McWilliams: It is probably significant that we have debated the Health Service today and yesterday. It is something of a shame that both motions could not have been combined, as they are very much interrelated.

The public no longer want to see the blame game being played — they want to see some action. I want to hear proposals from both the Minister and the Member winding up the debate to solve the problems. I have listened to much of the debate, and it has been disproportionately heavy on blame. Previous Governments have been blamed; not just the Conservatives, but also the current Labour Government, who seem to be investing as little as their predecessors. The Minister has been blamed, as have other Ministers and the Executive as a whole. Proposals must come out of the Assembly, otherwise motions such as this will continue to be debated.

I was worried to hear that medical negligence cases cost £27 million. That figure may go up, not down, if we do not start to tackle the crisis. I have received many letters, as other Members have, from consultants. We have previously mentioned, as has the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, cases where patients have been passed through accident and emergency departments straight on to wards, where they are assessed for trauma. That happens because hospitals do not have the specialised or nursing staff in accident and emergency departments to do that. That is extremely dangerous and will increase the number of negligence cases in the future. If we are to save money, instead of currently pouring money in to prevent more of those problems arising, plans must be put in place.

I was concerned to hear the Minister state yesterday that five sixths of all spending will go on existing services. That leaves one sixth for very little else. We must turn those figures around. I do not want to repeat what I said yesterday about the need to reorientate the culture of how health services are delivered. We must think about delivering intensive and acute care to communities.

We have highly qualified and educated health and social services staff who are ready and waiting to do that. Most staff want to work within their communities. We must start to deliver intensive therapies and care in the communities. Other countries have proved that it can be done, as have some trusts here. I want to ask the Minister why, having looked at what services the trusts are providing, there is such variation in their plans. Some trusts are simply sending patients to be institutionalised and dealt with in hospitals, while others are beginning to introduce innovative plans to prevent bed blocking from starting in the first place. Equally, other trusts are trying to discharge patients more quickly. There is a notion that patients are moved out of hospitals quicker and sicker, but it has been proved

that that is occurring less in Northern Ireland than elsewhere and that Northern Ireland is more able to cope with it.

We ought to look at plans of that kind. Yes, infections are increasing, and at the latest update 156 beds were out of use, but we should be able to predict other things. Infections are unpredictable, but most of what we are dealing with in the Health Service is predictable. It is time to reorient it and put those plans in place. Let us not wait for reorganisation; let us put that plan and those proposals in place now.

This morning we debated our December monitoring round, and I am very concerned. There is no such thing as a “Department of the Centre”, yet it appears in the monitoring return. I asked that question over and over again. If it means the Executive, then that should be clearly stated. If the Executive say that they are holding back £40 million for a rainy day, why was only £8 million of that given to the Health Service? Of that, £3.4 million went on medical equipment.

At the moment we are hearing about staff shortages. Annie Courtney said that not only is staff morale being sapped, but that now staff are being attacked for their inability to get on with their jobs. Real safety precautions must be put in place to stop that. In addressing the recruitment and retention of staff, we must build up their morale.

Unfortunately, staffing has now become so dependent on agency staff that the permanent nursing staff are demoralised. Agency staff should not constantly be relied upon to make up the shortfall. I understand that the permanent nursing staff have been reduced by 43% since 1998. Something must be done about that. I understand that medical staff have not been cut in the same way, but clearly that must be addressed.

I am often concerned in discussions about hospitals, but if there has to be a bit of firefighting, we must also look at how we can prevent problems arising around mental illness, physical disability and learning disability. Sue Ramsey quite rightly said that money is constantly being taken from those services to deal with the problems in the hospitals. Those problems are genuine.

Concerning cancer, if the Health Service strike is discussed today, it is only fair that we should know what will happen with regard to all those patients with cancer who look for information about the new cancer unit on the Belfast City Hospital site. Also, I have just heard that once again the neonatal unit at the Royal Victoria Hospital has been closed to outside admissions. With 5,000 births in that hospital and 500 in the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital, we knew that a plan for a new centralised maternity hospital was needed.

The issues of cost effectiveness and cost efficiencies really must be taken seriously. A huge number of highly

paid consultants sit around most of the time doing very little. Again, that service could perhaps be reoriented towards a midwife-led unit.

Those very difficult decisions clearly will have to be taken. To close the regional neonatal unit for the intensive care of babies to outside admissions is a very dangerous thing to do, and it clearly causes concern. I suggest that the Executive examine the reorientation of some of the moneys that were surrendered. Out of £40 million surrendered, only £8 million came out, and £3.4 million of that went on equipment. That left a very small sum of money — only £4.6 million — for the issues of staffing shortages and pressures. Those messages should not go out to disillusion people. There is £40 million, and the Executive must take it seriously. It is not only a matter of resources. It is also an issue of management, co-ordination and planning.

Mr Weir: To pick up on a point raised by Ms McWilliams, I must first express disappointment about cancer services. As late as yesterday, in a written question, I asked the Department for a date on which the cancer unit would be operational. The Department is still not in a position to provide that date. We need both certainty and swift action to ensure that people are cared for.

Today's debate is vital; it is difficult to find an issue that is more important to the people of Northern Ireland. Without indulging too much in the blame game, having been present for most of the debate, I am somewhat disappointed that so few Members have attended.

Suppose that a family doctor diagnoses that his or her patient needs an operation. That person is asked which day of the following week would suit for the operation. A telephone call is made to the hospital, and the arrangements are made for the operation to be performed the following week. That scenario seems extremely unrealistic; in fact, it would appear surreal to many people in Northern Ireland. However, it is commonplace in many parts of western Europe.

In the long term, it is not simply a question of funding. Although I support the calls for greater pressure to be put on the Exchequer to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom, we must realise that, as a whole, the United Kingdom has, for many years, lagged behind the general standards in western Europe. The level of gross domestic product that has been spent on health issues is well below the European average. Therefore, it is not simply a question of bringing Northern Ireland up to United Kingdom levels.

There has either been a deliberate misunderstanding or an attempt by some Members to suggest that the motion is not about funding. No one has suggested that additional funding is not required for the Health Service. However, time and time again, Members have correctly said that it is not simply a question of

funding. It may not be, but funding is crucial to the allocation of resources.

The Department and the Minister must accept their fair share of the blame. It is not simply a question of the Minister's inadequacies; the crisis has also come about as a result of the apparently unaltered managerial ethos in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. At worst, change is regarded as something to be delayed and, at best, as something to be avoided altogether. One wonders whether that Department treats original thought with the same contempt that a minister would treat the concept of original sin. It seems that there is a resistance to change in the Department.

Although we are all agreed that we want to realise clichés such as pulling together and not treating health as a political issue, much of the blame must rest with the Minister and the Department. We need a Minister who will provide action, rather than consultations alone; we need a Minister who will deliver to the coalface of medicine, rather than produce yet another review.

Several issues must be tackled. If, as was indicated, the preponderance of health boards and trusts needs to be streamlined urgently, one would hope that the Department would adopt a proactive approach and devise its own proposals. However, if it is either unwilling or unable to do so, the Executive must fast-track the review of public administration. I appreciate that a review of public administration is ongoing, but priority must be given to the health issues to ensure that results are delivered as soon as possible.

As was indicated by the Chairperson of the Health Committee and others, including Mr McCarthy, the issues of primary care and care in the community must be tackled. They are the key to the hospital crisis. Doctors tell us that too many people are unnecessarily admitted to hospital and that people remain in hospitals for too long because there are no beds available in the community. That has a knock-on effect on the waiting lists for acute hospitals and provision. I am not convinced that the proposals will benefit primary care.

That is at the heart of the matter.

4.00 pm

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

We also need rapid progress on acute hospitals. The Hayes Report states that too many hospitals deal only with acute services, so expertise is spread too thinly. Most doctors accept that that is the case. A better system would concentrate the number of acute hospitals and provide a secondary tier of services at community level. In my town of Bangor, a very good community hospital provides that level of service, thus enabling real medical resources to be put into acute hospitals.

Something must also be done urgently about the disillusionment of healthcare staff. Like others, I pay tribute to them. Unfortunately, to use a phrase that was first used in the first world war, “lions are led by donkeys” in the Health Service. Staff at the lower levels provide excellent care, but they are not given the help that they need from the top. A British Medical Association (BMA) General Practitioners’ Committee recently conducted a survey of GPs’ opinions by sending a questionnaire to every family doctor in the UK. The findings, which were released a few weeks ago, highlight the dissatisfaction with the Health Service and the need to resolve urgently the shortage of GPs. One of the results of the survey shows that four out of every 10 young GPs want to reduce their working hours over the next five years, and most GPs in their twenties intend to retire early. That is a major problem; resources have been put into training people, but too many drop out because of poor morale. That issue must be tackled.

We must make better use of technology. For example, more use of IT would enable medical staff to see, at the touch of a button, what medication a patient was on, what illnesses he or she suffered from and the results of previous investigations. That would save more lives, which is the ultimate test of any Health Service provision.

Ways of screening must be improved to ensure that people who do not need to see a doctor do not use up time. More help could then be given to those who need it. That would also ensure greater mobility and would allow surgeons to spend more time in theatre performing procedures.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Weir: The crisis has not been caused simply by a lack of funding; inadequate management has played its part. We need action, not words; we need delivery, not another review or consultation.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Few Members from the west have taken part in the debate; I wish to rectify that. Much of the debate has centred on management and on the roles of the Minister and the Committee. This is a long-running debate; it is a regurgitated debate. We are rehashing the same debate time and time again, a debate prompted more by politics than by health.

As I mentioned in yesterday’s debate on community care, there is a history of destruction of the Health Service by the Tory Government, which dates from the 1980s and 1990s. They made cuts of 3% a year, which left us to cope with years of underfunding in community, primary, acute, and accident and emergency care in all Six Counties. The responsibility for health also lies beyond the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: all Departments must make the matter a

priority or it will not receive the attention that is needed. Healthcare is very significant, and health problems are probably the worst problems that anyone must face. Health should therefore have priority over other departmental issues. The Department of Education and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development have a role to play, and, in my part of the country, the state of country roads also affects health.

Health issues have a major impact on family income. There is a high unemployment rate in Fermanagh. Many people are forced to take low-paid jobs, and we have a growing elderly population. All those factors increase the pressure on local hospitals.

Food and diet also have an impact on health. We live in a fast food society, in which children eat a good deal of junk food, and such products are widely advertised. Drinks vending machines are available in schools, which encourages children to have a high-sugar diet. Those factors will have a massive impact on hospitals’ future costs. The effect of pesticides on food is a problem for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I mentioned that yesterday to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who said that there was nothing wrong with organic or locally produced food. However, I was referring to food that we import, and which is grown using substances that we banned years ago.

Drugs, alcohol abuse and smoking also affect health. Every day, young people watch people smoking on the most popular television shows. Such programmes advertise smoking as if it were going out of fashion — of course, we hope that it will. Government Departments, Ministers and others should lobby to stop such advertisements for smoking, so that young people do not succumb to peer pressure and begin to smoke, as smoking can have a major impact on young people’s future health.

The foot-and-mouth disease crisis and the loss of income in areas such as Armagh and Newry have had an effect by way of stress, depression, suicide rates, help to families and counselling. I raised that issue in yesterday’s debate on community care. Those factors affect health services, because, if patients do not receive early treatment, they may have to go to hospital, which results in very high costs.

Carmel Hanna was quoted earlier as saying that it is no longer possible to blame everything on London. However, London must be blamed for the amount of money that we are allowed to spend here every year. Members, and particularly those in the DUP, seem to be playing politics. This is a handy football for the DUP, which it will use to the best of its ability. Health does not seem to come into it — it is mostly about politics.

Areas such as Fermanagh have fared badly with the recently published document on the Noble index.

Departments and Ministers should re-examine that document to see whether it has been rural-proofed and TSN-proofed. We are told that it has been TSN-proofed, but I do not believe that that is the case — it does not stand up to local scrutiny. Perhaps the entire document should be reviewed. If Departments use that document as a baseline — and it would seem that that they do — rural areas will lose out badly.

Responsibility for access to healthcare and acute care services falls under the remit of Peter Robinson and the Department for Regional Development. Roads are very much a part of any debate on the Hayes Review and the reconfiguration of hospitals. In fact, access to services is more important than the hospitals themselves, and that issue must be dealt with. From the recent plans published for roads, it seems that most of the funding will be sucked into the Belfast metropolitan area, while other areas will receive no funding.

Barry McElduff mentioned the Hayes Report, which is vital to the future of hospital configurations in the Six Counties. We must include the border areas in those configurations too. A large geographical area running from Monaghan to Sligo, and including Tyrone, Fermanagh and Cavan, could be left with no acute healthcare services if both sides do not work together to ensure the provision of vital health services.

We need to get value for money from the Hayes review, and it must be implemented. Tyrone and Fermanagh need acute services and primary care — both areas must be looked after, and we need decisions as soon as possible.

I am disturbed that the Committee and the Department are at such extreme odds — or so it seems from this debate. That is not a healthy situation. It is not good for the health of the people, and is not a great way of going forward. They have to find a consensus. Is there enough money? Are we doing the right things? Are we getting it right, and are we going forward in the next number of years to put things right? Go raibh maith agat.

Madam Deputy Speaker: There being no further requests to speak — Mr Shannon.

Mr Shannon: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak.

This subject concerns us all, irrespective of party or opinion. Each of us is concerned that the Health Service is unable to deliver at present. Many of us have addressed this issue before. Most of us have spoken on it, and we will probably do so again. Yesterday we debated the provision of community care, which is a big issue. I agree with Members who say that there is a clear relationship between both. There is a domino effect — they both work in tandem. Will this debate end without any action being taken, or will steps be taken to address the issue?

Anyone who reads the provincial or local papers before or after Christmas will be aware of specific cases where people have not received the service that they should have done. The Health Service is failing to deliver for them. The demands on the Health Service continue to increase, and the system is crumbling at the edges. Indeed, my Colleague Mr Paisley Jnr said that the Health Service is showing signs of meltdown. That is what we believe to be the seriousness of the situation.

We all have constituents coming each and every day to our advice centres, phoning our homes and speaking to us on the streets. They tell us their horror stories of delays, long waits for operations, and a Health Service that cannot cope.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Accusations have been made in this debate that the DUP is being partial. I have a Roman Catholic constituent who has had cancer. She is fortunate that the cancer is in remission, but as a consequence she has bowel trouble. Her GP said that it would be terrible if the cancer came back and referred her to the hospital. She got a card to say that she would be seen in seven months. That is not an isolated case — it goes on and on. As Members of Parliament, and Members of this House, we have a responsibility to those people to highlight their cases.

When one of my Colleagues, Mr Campbell, banned sheep grazing in the Mourne because of cryptosporidium, Members called for his resignation. Now, when these problems are happening in the Health Service, criticism of both the Minister and the Department should be legitimate. We have been told that the Committee and the Department are at loggerheads, so something must be drastically wrong.

Mr Shannon: I thank the leader of my party for his intervention. We all could recount similar cases of people who, irrespective of their affiliation or political opinion, have come to us for help. That is our job as elected representatives.

I pay tribute to the doctors, nurses, and the ancillary staff. They are the unsung heroes who try to do their best in very difficult circumstances.

4.15 pm

I want to highlight waiting lists, as they are a good indicator of what is happening. The waiting lists for orthopaedic speciality — not operations, just appointments — are interesting: 1,271 people have been waiting between one and 11 months, while 13,053 people have been waiting between 12 and 24 months or more.

The waiting list for surgery is horrendous. Almost 15,000 people are waiting for general surgery; 1,500 have been waiting for more than 24 months; 629 people are waiting for neurosurgery, 266 for 11 months and

353 for more than 24 months. It goes on and on. Two thousand five hundred people are waiting for plastic surgery, and 549 are waiting for cardiac operations. Almost 50,000 people in the Province are waiting for operations. That is a health system failing to deliver; that is a Department in chaos and disarray.

Things might have been bad a couple of years ago, but they have got worse. In 1999, 14,020 people were waiting for orthopaedic outpatient appointments; today that figure has almost doubled. That should illustrate the situation for those who are in any doubt that we are in crisis.

The Health Service is not doing enough for victims of sexual abuse. I met the chief executive of the Ulster Hospital Community Trust, and I asked him to make extra provision. The money is not there. The Nexus Institute does tremendous work in providing counselling. However, when I asked for extra provision for counselling in my constituency, I was told that the institute would love to do that, because people needed assistance, but that there was no money. There is extra demand on the Health Service, and the service is needed, but it is not being delivered. People need help, but the Department has failed to deliver.

Administration must be revamped. There are 27 trusts and four boards, yet there is talk of introducing another level of administration into the Health Service. We must make changes, and there must be streamlining at that level to make the service more efficient.

With regard to funding for the Health Service, it is time that we took the matter to the highest level, to Westminster. It is time for funding to be made available through the Department and through the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The time is right for a radical approach, with no holds barred. If that does not happen, I am afraid that we shall return to discuss the future of the Health Service while our constituents wait and suffer. I wonder how many of those on the waiting list for urgent operations will be here in a few months or less if they do not get the urgent and positive action that is needed. I support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Chuir go leor Comhaltaí a n-ímní in iúl inniu faoi chúrsaí inár seirbhís otharlainne, agus tá mé féin ar aon aigne leo faoina thábhachtaí atá sé dul go bun na faidhbe seo go héifeachtach.

Tugaim do m'aire go n-aithníonn Comhaltaí brú suntasach a bheith ar ár n-otharlanna agus go háirithe ar an fhoireann atá ag obair iontu. Is mór mo mheas ar obair ár bhfoirne; mhaolaigh a scileanna, a n-oilteacht agus a ndíograis ar iarmhairtí na mbrúnna a bhí ar othair ar na mallaihbh.

Ón uair a ceapadh i m'Aire mé, tharraing mé aird ar na brúnna troma atá ar ár n-otharlanna agus ar ár seirbhísí cúraim phobail; d'áitigh mé nár cuireadh acmhainní ar fáil do na seirbhísí seo le riar ar na héilimh a dhéantar orthu. Is é firinne lom an scéil nach bhfuil na hacmhainní acu ná an fhoireann le riar go sásúil ar na héilimh a dhéantar orthu; éilimh atá ag méadú de shíor.

Dhearbhaigh mé ariamh nach mbeidh ár seirbhísí in innimh plé leis na brúnna a luaigh Comhaltaí inniu gan infheistíocht athfhillteach shuntasach thar roinnt blianta.

Le seachtainí agus le míonna beaga anuas, chuir mé béim chomh maith ar an iomad dea-rud atá ag dul ar aghaidh ar fud ár seirbhísí, ainneoin a bhfuil de dheacrachtaí ann le hacmhainní. Tá dul chun cinn á dhéanamh againn i gcónaí le caighdeán agus éifeacht seirbhísí a fheabhsú; agus níl deireadh ar na torthaí ar an phleanáil a rinne muid lenár gcórais a shruthlíniú agus lenár gcomhoibriú a fheabhsú, go háirithe san uair is treise brú.

Many Members have expressed concern about the situation in our hospital services today. I share their anxiety, and I am equally determined to ensure that the underlying issues are effectively addressed. I note the widespread recognition by Members of the significant pressures on our hospitals, and particularly on the staff who work in them. I have the highest admiration for the work of our staff, whose skill, expertise and commitment have played a vital part in minimising the effects of recent pressures on hospital patients.

Ever since my appointment, I have drawn attention to the heavy pressures on our hospitals and community care services and argued strongly that these services have not been resourced in the past to meet the demands made on them. I welcome the fact that that has been reiterated today by virtually every Member who spoke in the debate. Our community and hospital services simply do not have the capacity or the staffing to handle the continually growing demands that are being made of them.

Despite the removal from the baseline of £190 million in today's terms since the 1980s and 1990s, the service has treated 10% more patients, and there has been a 27% increase in community care packages. The service has also seen an increase in emergency admissions of almost 10% in the last year. I have maintained that without significant recurring investment over several years, our services will not be able to deal with the pressures that Members have drawn attention to so graphically today.

Over recent weeks and months I have also highlighted the fact that, despite all the problems relating to resourcing, there is still much that is positive happening across our services. We continue to make real progress in improving the quality and effectiveness of services,

and our planning to streamline our systems and improve collaboration continues to pay dividends, particularly at times of intense pressure. Colleagues elsewhere have commented favourably on the degree of integration in our services.

With regard to the work and the immediate action that has been taken to address the situation that I faced when taking office, since that day our hospitals have 33 more intensive-care and high-dependency beds, 100 more nurses are entering training every year and more people are receiving community care than ever before. There will be a further 1,000 extra community care packages in the coming year alone, on top of the additional 230 extra this year, and 100 new ambulances are on our roads.

I have also directed additional resources into important areas of hospital services, such as cancer treatment and cardiac surgery. That is only an initial step in the right direction. Local cancer units are now up and running in all our major hospitals, with over 50% of all day-patient chemotherapy now provided outside the main centre in Belfast. We are also making significant progress on the construction of the new cancer centre.

On foot of the recent review of cardiac surgery, I am putting in place measures to get more operations carried out and to deal with unacceptably long waits for treatment. We have carried out convincing work to improve all of those services. I am determined to press for further improvements in the quality of both those vital service areas.

We are also addressing capacity issues through staffing, recruitment, training and the professional development of staff by means of comprehensive health and social services workforce planning. That will have a direct and positive impact on the staffing of hospitals. Those are just some of the building blocks being used to put meat on the bones of our clear vision for high-quality services as resources become available to put the vision into practice. There has also been detailed planning over the short, medium and longer terms. We have the investing for health strategy, the review of acute hospital services, 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care', the review of community care and the implementation of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service review. Those measures will enable us to take the necessary steps to meet the needs of the service user, while reflecting the potential impact of longer-term drivers for change, such as the age profile of the population and new or emerging medical technologies.

I have already reported to the Assembly on how I am developing that work. I assure Members that my Department and I are committed to working closely and effectively with the Committee. I value and welcome the Committee's input and support and I will do so in

respect of the work that lies ahead. We must work together to make this vision for the future a reality.

Other immediate actions have taken place. I have already mentioned extra nurses, extra ambulances, extra care in the community and extra intensive care and high-dependency beds. On top of that, the Northern Ireland Social Care Council has been established, to develop the work that social workers want done and to improve standards for social workers. There are extra residential childcare places, there is closer integration of the service, and I have put in place financial management arrangements. There have been several forms of immediate action, and yet the self-same Members still stand up during debates and say that a decision must be made. When I make a decision, I am described as "imposing change".

I am working very closely to set up local health and social care groups. Much work has already been undertaken, guidance has been issued, and further guidance will be provided shortly. The Department has been discussing the matter with the British Medical Association and other colleagues. We are setting up these groups to ensure that local people and local health professionals can work together in a multidisciplinary fashion to make local decisions about local services. In addition, this year there has been significant investment in primary care, with an additional £2 million of investment to support the infrastructure of general practice and £2.3 million secured from Executive programme funds to modernise the use of information and communication technology (ICT), as one Member mentioned. The aim of our work is to modernise the use of ICT in general practice over the next three years.

A further £1.5 million for primary care development was devolved to boards, and additional money has been made available to boards this year to meet the cost of setting up the new groups from 1 April 2002. The money currently used to run the GP fundholding scheme, which is tied up in that, and to run the commissioning pilots will be redeployed to finance the new arrangements. That will also allow up to £2.5 million to be diverted from management costs to front-line primary care services. We cannot do that until GP fundholding ends next year. It was unfortunate that we were not able to end that last year. That is on top of the additional resources that I already mentioned.

I join Members in expressing my absolute disgust at the attacks on health and social services staff. The recent attacks in Altnagelvin Hospital have already been mentioned. The Western Health and Social Services Board and Altnagelvin Hospital are discussing specific measures to enhance security at the hospital. I share Members' concerns about this outrageous attack on vital services, and I know that the trust and the board will give priority to looking at improvements. I

will give immediate attention to any proposals that come to me and, while I am attending this debate, my permanent secretary is visiting Altnagelvin Hospital.

With regard to primary care patients, a great deal of action has been taken to provide new GP out-of-hours arrangements to keep people out of hospitals. We also ran a recent advertising campaign to encourage people to get the right treatment, particularly during winter. The Member who raised the point will know of the pilot schemes in Ards Community Hospital and Bangor Community Hospital, which treat many people who would otherwise have gone to the accident and emergency department at the Ulster Hospital. Primary care is central to the way in which our social and health services will work together in the years ahead.

4.30 pm

I recognise that the development of the cancer centre is a priority. Work is ongoing at the day-patients' and outpatients' wing of the planned cancer facility. That will be completed at the end of 2002 and will be open early next year. The Department of Finance and Personnel has approved a detailed business case for the construction of the new centre, which has been revised to take account of best practice and the latest technology. With the support of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I shall raise that crucial development with Executive Colleagues, with a view to having it included in the next tranche of Executive programme funds. The Committee has discussed the matter with me in the past.

I take the opportunity to outline some of the immediate actions and benefits that have resulted from the framework for action on waiting lists, on which many people have worked so assiduously. The MRI waiting list initiatives that are taking place across all boards, which include the use of mobile scanners, have successfully reduced waiting numbers. In cardiac surgery initiatives, the Northern Health and Social Services Board has secured capacity with Health Care International (HCI) Private Hospital and Ross Hall Hospital in Glasgow for 51 patients. If all those patients undergo surgery before the end of this financial year, the board's excess waiting list for cardiac operations will be cleared.

The Southern Health and Social Services Board is using a mobile cath lab at Craigavon Area Hospital to treat 20 patients per month. The Western Health and Social Services Board is using the North West Independent Hospital at Ballykelly for orthopaedic and plastic surgery, and the Northern Board has plans to do that also. Some 210 orthopaedic outpatients have been seen in the Southern Board as a result of a waiting list initiative. The Western Board has held additional ophthalmology clinics at Roe Valley Hospital, which had reduced inpatient waiting numbers from 360 to 30

at 19 December 2001, and the average waiting time from two years to six months.

In general surgery, the Mater Hospital and the Downe Hospital will take 50 and 200 patients respectively from other providers by March 2002. We are working continually on the validation of waiting lists and on specific pilot projects on restructuring theatre use and on rheumatology. Down Lisburn Health and Social Services Trust has an acute and community nurse pilot scheme for rheumatology, and it is also making use of an acute and community nurse for chronic pain. Those are just some of the initiatives that are being introduced to address current problems.

I have been monitoring the situation at Craigavon Area Hospital and other hospitals for some time, and I am very aware that staff in Craigavon are working under extreme pressure. I spoke to staff when I visited that hospital, and I have spoken frequently to the chairperson and the chief executive. Departmental officials are also in continual contact with the hospital. The Southern Health and Social Services Board and Craigavon Area Hospital have been working closely together to deal with the increasing pressures on the hospital.

I assure Ian Paisley Jnr that I look doctors, nurses and ancillary workers in the eye daily. I am delighted to hear that he recognises the effects of underfunding on our services, and I hope that he will work with me to fight for better resources to support those hard-pressed staff.

Although much can be done to make effective use of the facilities at the South Tyrone Hospital, it is not currently possible to provide the type of overnight care described. As Members will know, the Royal College of Physicians withdrew training recognition from the hospital in July 2000. That decision, on top of several measures that had been taken in previous years, led to the temporary removal of some services from that site.

The long-term decisions on the future of the hospital will be taken in the context of the acute hospitals review. There are, however, many outpatient clinics and day surgeries, including new clinics for cardiac outpatients, and brain trauma, at South Tyrone Hospital. There is also a doctor-led minor injuries unit, a comprehensive radiology service, inpatient medical geriatric wards, a day hospital for the elderly and a significant professions-allied-to-medicine service. As South Tyrone Hospital cannot provide overnight care of the type described, it could not have been used to help those recovering from major trauma surgery when pressure was being placed on Craigavon Area Hospital. However, the Southern Board and Craigavon Area Hospital Group Trust are working together to determine how more effective use can be made of South Tyrone Hospital. The question that was raised

on extending the doctor-led minor injuries provision is currently under investigation as part of those discussions.

Members often talk of the need to approach the Chancellor of the Exchequer to get a fair share of public money. I do not wish — and it would not be right — to stray into the remit of the Finance and Personnel Minister, Dr Seán Farren. However, I fully agree that the Barnett formula is inadequate and defective, and I note that it will be a matter for the Executive to decide how to approach the matter in the future. If five sixths of additional money is spent on the rising costs of existing services, and the rising costs are being driven by developments in England on pay review body recommendations, drug costs, clinical and other professional standards, and we are not receiving the same uplifts as England, the inevitable effect will be an impact on our standards and levels of service here. In spite of getting additional money this year on top of Barnett, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is faring less well than the provision in England, where all the significant drivers of pay costs originate.

This year our budget is 5.6% higher than the amount spent last year, including one-off non-recurrent moneys that I secured from monitoring rounds. In England the equivalent increase is 9.4%. Those involved there receive a greater amount of recurrent funding which aids them in their longer-term planning. As has been said, there is a distinct difficulty in having to rely on additional in-year moneys, which are welcome, but they are non-recurrent. Therefore they are not suitable for use in addressing recurring difficulties. They are also not useful in employing additional staff or in addressing long-term planning. We need not only significant extra resources, but much more certainty about the level of funding in the future. Therefore, with regard to the December monitoring addition, it is one-off money, and it would not be prudent to use it for recurrent expenditure. The best and only effective way to put back the capacity that we need is to ensure that we have a properly resourced service. I will try my hardest to secure that in the spending review.

Similarly, I have put in place financial management arrangements that ensure that I can track the money. I published my priorities for action in the Programme for Government, which sets out the key priorities for the service. Boards now have to set out their service investment plans and how they intend to deploy their additional resources. Similarly, trusts, in their service delivery plans, have to set out how they will deliver the agenda. The resources that were needed to deliver the priorities listed in the priorities for action have all been ring-fenced this year, and no discretion is allowed for their deployment elsewhere.

Regular progress meetings with boards enable us to keep track of where the money is going and, should

boards wish to redeploy some of the ring-fenced funds, they must first get our approval.

I have put in place a complete system to ensure that health and personal social services remain financially stable, including a requirement to pursue robust recovery plans where expenditure exceeds income by more than 0.5% and the requirement to produce contingency plans when in-year deficits are forecast.

However, one of the most significant points has been the moves to remove the internal market, which contributed to the financial problems by imposing significant income risks on the system and having competitive, rather than collaborative, working arrangements. We have now introduced much more collaborative working arrangements between boards and trusts.

Of course, ensuring that care services are adequately funded before new developments are considered is another important point. However, the overall point is that if we can ensure adequate funding for services to begin with, then we can make best use of those services, and of the dynamism, dedication and commitment of our staff.

Reference was made to the additional funds that I have received this year, and questions were asked about what had happened in relation to that. People will know that of that money — allowing for pay and price inflation, as one Member said — there was £41 million available to improve services. That is less than 2% of a £2.25 billion budget. However, within that I have used those resources to achieve, among other things, an increase in the number of high-dependency beds; investment in improving cancer services; the extension of the Sure Start programme for disadvantaged children; an increase in the number of residential childcare places; an increase in the number of community care packages; and the beginning of modernisation of the Ambulance Service's accident and emergency fleet. Those are vital issues that had to be addressed.

Like many Members, I have talked about the problem of resources, and much of the pressure that pervades our hospital services has its roots in a lack of investment over many years. As I have said, no less than £190 million — in today's terms — was taken out of health and social services in the 1980s and 1990s. The legacy of that approach has left a massive lack of capacity in staff, in beds, in equipment and in the community. The outcome is that too many people are in hospital who do not need or want to be there. The immediate action and the long-term planning that we are engaged in are intended to provide a service in which that will not be the outcome for our people. There is no way around the present lack of capacity other than by returning capacity to the service. To do that, we need a stable funding platform to support the development and maintenance of all our services.

A properly resourced service is an absolute priority. I welcome the extra funding that has been made available for this year and next. It will help to sustain existing services and facilitate some modest improvements. However, it will be a long haul to remedy the funding failures of the past. In the meantime, the service is working hard with what it has.

In preparing for winter, for example, a great deal of detailed planning went into making sure that services were boosted for the inevitable winter peaks in demand. There are extra hospital beds and nursing home beds available in this winter period, as well as extra community care services. GP and community pharmacist services have been augmented, and there was another successful flu vaccination programme this year. That is evidence of the commitment and dedication of the staff and also of a year's detailed planning to see what was needed to ensure that winter pressures would be met by a service that had planned for it.

During the recent virus outbreak that resulted in the temporary closure of some beds on top of the winter pressures, staff worked tirelessly to minimise the disruption to patients. Different trusts worked together collaboratively, as we saw with Musgrave Park Hospital and others when the flu virus affected the fracture service in the Royal Victoria Hospital.

4.45 pm

Staff deserve our thanks and credit for their efforts over these weeks in containing and controlling the outbreak and in ensuring that no one who needed emergency care was denied it. It is crucial that we give them the support and the resources they need and that we look to the longer-term future of our hospitals. The acute hospitals review will prepare the ground for major and long-overdue modernisation of our hospital services. The resulting discussion at Executive level, the consultation, the equality impact assessment and the final decisions — all to be taken in the course of this year — will set the hospitals' agenda for some years to come.

I want to build hospital services as part of an overall, fully integrated service that will meet need not only today, but into the future also. That work will require commitment, determination and resourcing. The work that I have begun will bear fruit, and I am determined to see it through. I look forward to Members' support in building the services that people have every right to expect.

Mr Berry: It has been a delight to sit through the debate and listen to many Members' concerns in relation to Northern Ireland's Health Service.

I rubbish the claim that the DUP is being political by tabling such a motion. I stress that we have constituents coming to us from both sides of the community who

are raising deep concerns about the healthcare treatment that they or their relatives have been receiving in hospitals across Northern Ireland. It is important for public representatives such as us to highlight those concerns in the Assembly. Health is an important issue, and no matter what colour, creed or religion a person is, if he fears his health is affected or that he has recurring cancer and he is told that he must wait for seven months before seeing a consultant, such as was the case with Dr Paisley's constituent, such issues should be brought to the Floor of the House. We cannot say "Oh sorry, we cannot raise that because we might be accused of being political." We need to steer away from that and focus on our constituents' concerns.

Members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety tell me that health is one of their constituents' biggest concerns. Why is that the case? It is because of the state of our Health Service, and it is up to us to highlight that situation.

The majority of Members' speeches today have been helpful and productive. Dr Hendron mentioned GP fundholding. That issue was raised by GPs last year at the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. We have lost a golden opportunity to provide a first-class measure in primary care, and we must seize the opportunity we now have to put that right. I trust that the Department will take Dr Hendron's and other Members' views and concerns about primary care and the ending of GP fundholding on board.

Rev Robert Coulter stated that Members must not attempt to score points. I agree with that. We have to work for the constituents of Northern Ireland, no matter where they are from. Many people have deep concerns about their health. Rev Robert Coulter discussed the problem of waiting for operations as did my Colleague Mr Shannon, who stated that a patient must first go onto a consultant's waiting list and then wait for the operation to be scheduled. That waiting time can average out at over a year. That is totally unacceptable. Rev Robert Coulter stated that we must examine the entire Health Service system in Northern Ireland.

It is clear from the debate that although money is important, we must take a close look at the management of the Health Service. I want the Department to tell the Assembly, through the Health Committee, what it intends to do about its management structure and the boards and trusts. I have not yet heard the Department make any proactive suggestions.

Mrs Courtney said that proper management from top to bottom of the structure and on the hospital wards would improve the Health Service. The perception is that there is too much bureaucracy. However, it is up to us to keep highlighting that until the perception is

no longer true. Although we need professional management, it must be properly structured.

Rev Robert Coulter said that we must examine doctors' and consultants' contracts. He raised concerns about nurses' training, the morale of medical staff and the stress that they are under. The Health Committee has visited many hospitals and talked to nurses on the wards. They told us of patients waiting on trolleys for beds, but they also told us about the pressure that they are under. Nurses and health professionals must deal with complaints and the anxiety of patients' relatives all the time, which causes them stress and anxiety. The Department must consider that and deal with it in order to help the nurses' situation. It requires immediate decisions.

My Colleague Mr Watson commended the hospital staff across Northern Ireland, as Members have often done. In the last debate on the Health Service in Northern Ireland, I said that the service was running on the goodwill of the nurses, doctors and hospital staff. These problems must not be put on the back-burner. As a Member of the Assembly and of the Health Committee, I say that if we must continue to raise the issue of the Health Service, we shall do so. We should raise it at every opportunity, because it is our duty to the people whom we represent and to the nurses and hospital staff.

The problems of Craigavon Area Hospital have made headlines for several weeks. The problems are still there, and we must examine them. Mr Morrow gave us his views on the problems in his constituency, as well as those of Upper Bann and Newry and Armagh. Craigavon Area Hospital and the hospitals in those areas are under pressure because of the closure of the South Tyrone and Banbridge Hospitals. Those closures were bound to have a detrimental effect on the Health Service and on Craigavon Area Hospital. Craigavon was put under pressure by having to cover the services of other constituencies. Mr Morrow called for the reopening of South Tyrone Hospital to provide more services. We must relieve the pressure on Craigavon Area Hospital before it reaches meltdown.

We go from one crisis to another. All our people have the fundamental right to good healthcare. He said that there is a perception in the community that no one cares. Surely this debate shows that someone cares. The debates initiated by Ms Hanna and Mr Gallagher showed that someone cares. It is important that those issues are taken on board. The Assembly has to show the community that it cares.

Time and time again we hear that the Tories created the current problems in the Health Service, yet in today's headlines we find a problem that was not created by the Tories. During the last three years £27 million has been paid out in medical negligence cases. That is a matter of deep concern. How can the Assembly tell the

people of Northern Ireland that it is doing everything it can for the Health Service, when they only have to look at the headline in today's 'Belfast Telegraph' to find that £27 million, which could have been spent on many of the issues that were discussed in the debate today, has been going down the gully? The Health Committee needs to know — at its meeting tomorrow — how that £27 million was wasted and what plans are being put in place to ensure that that never happens again. Whether the sum is £27 million or £100 that should not happen. Something needs to be done about it.

Mr Gallagher went on to say that funding and management are big issues. The high salaries paid to executives also give cause for great concern. He felt that general planning is needed. He referred to the South Tyrone Hospital. Management and funding were the two big issues raised today.

Mr McFarland raised a point that I thought was important. He asked where the £2.5 billion was being spent. He stated rightly that the Committee had tried to examine the health accounts and that it had not been possible at that time. How is that money spent through the system? The Committee needs further briefing on that situation. He also stated that there is a problem with poor relations between the Department and the Committee. Committee members trust that those relations will be mended in the weeks ahead. He also said that there was an arrogant attitude towards the Committee. That must be rectified.

Mr Paisley Jnr talked about the problems that are renewed daily. He mentioned his visit to Craigavon Area Hospital. He said that everyone there is under severe pressure — patients, relatives, nurses and doctors — and that something needs to be done. He said that he thought the Health Service was in meltdown. There is a lack of beds and a lack of resources, and management at the top has failed. That is the perception in the community. It is up to the Department to take all those matters on board and to deal with them effectively now. In future when officials from the Department are being cross-examined and questioned they must have proper answers.

Ms McWilliams made some important points. She wanted to know what proposals were being brought forward. She said that time and time again this subject has been debated in the Chamber and asked what was being done about it. Debates such as this are important. There are Department of Health officials here taking notes of Members' proposals. It is a way of doing something about the Health Service.

Ms McWilliams also condemned the attacks on health staff across Northern Ireland. The House condemns the attacks on the staff at Altnagelvin Hospital. Those are matters of grave concern. Further attacks on medical staff in hospitals will have an impact on

resources. Staff are, quite rightly, calling for measures to deal with the problem. However, the provision of security to allay the anxieties of staff and relatives visiting the hospitals will require more money.

There have been many matters raised in the debate today. In conclusion, more needs to be done regarding the perception of management and about how funding is spent. Also, the Assembly needs to know more about the waste of £27 million through medical negligence. We

need answers and action — not reviews, consultation and discussion — to address this crisis.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take immediate action to address the health crisis in our hospitals.

Adjourned at 5.00 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 28 January 2002

The Assembly met at noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. A couple of weeks ago, my Colleague, Kieran McCarthy, highlighted the paucity of Executive business. Last week, the Executive managed to give one statement during the entire week's business. This week, they will not even manage that. Have you received any requests, under Standing Order 18, from any Ministers to make statements to the House on their failure to bring forward any significant matter of legislative business for some weeks?

Secondly, will you issue guidelines, under Standing Order 28, on the introduction of private Member's business or private Member's Bills, so that those Members who wish to see this place work can take over from where the Executive have apparently left off?

Mr Speaker: The Member raises several issues. First, I have been asked, on several occasions, if I have had requests from Ministers to make statements. Although I do not wish to give any hostage to fortune, I have never yet refused any Minister the opportunity to make a statement. On almost every occasion, I have been able to facilitate their making statements on the days that they wished. There has been no change as far as that is concerned — *[Interruption]*.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I shall complete this particular point of order.

Each week, the Business Committee looks at all the business that comes from the Executive, Committees, private Members or anywhere else and tries to arrange for it to be put forward in a reasonable order. In the absence of a Leader of the House, and as Chairperson of the Business Committee, I try to ensure that the Government have their business properly attended to and that Back-Benchers in Executive parties and Members of non-Executive parties have the opportunity

to scrutinise the business that comes forward. The Member is familiar with that procedure. In all honesty, the Business Committee does its best to order the business properly.

As far as private Member's Bills are concerned, there is nothing at all to obstruct any private Member from bringing forward a Bill. The only issue at stake is whether the Assembly will provide financial assistance for the drafting of Bills. That is a matter that has been attended to by the Commission and by the Procedures Committee, who are both looking at arrangements to facilitate that. However, there is no reason whatsoever for any Member's not bringing forward a private Member's Bill if he or she wishes. That has already been done on one occasion.

There is also no reason for a Committee's not bringing forward a Bill. Committees can bring forward legislation in their own right, but that option has not yet been taken up.

I trust that that answers the points of order raised by the Member. Dr Paisley had a point of order.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Perhaps you can help me, Mr Speaker. The words in the question put to you were

"where the Executive have apparently left off".

I did not know that the Executive had ever started. The Agriculture Committee had one piece of legislation on dangerous dogs, which was the sole legislative contribution that the Department of Agriculture brought before the House.

Mr Speaker: I am not aware that there has been either laying on or laying off as far as the Executive are concerned, but the Business Committee is at liberty to order only the business that is brought to it. As Chairman of that Committee, I must say that all its members do their best to ensure that the business is well ordered. As Members will see from the No Day Named List, several matters can still be raised, although they are almost exclusively from private Members.

ASSEMBLY:

BUSINESS COMMITTEE

Resolved:

That Mr John Tierney replace Mr Eddie McGrady MP as a member of the Business Committee. — *[Dr McDonnell.]*

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Mrs E Bell: I beg to move

That this Assembly condemns the breakdown of law and order in Northern Ireland society, including attacks on postal workers, ambulance staff, bus and train personnel and elderly members of the community, and calls on the Secretary of State to allocate sufficient, specific resources to enable the PSNI and other organisations to improve the situation at the earliest opportunity.

The motion is timely, and I hope that Members will treat it in a constructive and consensual way.

I begin with an apt quotation.

“First they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out — because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the communists, and I did not speak out — because I was not a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out — because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me — and by then there was no one left to speak out for me.”

That quotation has crossed my mind several times in the past few weeks, and I hope that its relevance will become more clear. Members will have read with mounting horror and frustration the daily reports of attacks, robberies and physical assaults on people of all ages and backgrounds. Attacks have been made on the police, ambulance staff, firefighters and even teachers, who have all been carrying out their respective duties in their different ways to protect and improve our community. In the past 24 hours, there have been several such instances. Robberies have been planned and carried out against people from all walks of life, from families in the Belfast suburbs to 80- and 90-year-old pensioners in homes in the city or in isolated accommodation. Personal attacks vary from ripping a mobile phone from a schoolchild's hand to mugging the elderly for a few pounds, often in a town centre in broad daylight, as happened on Sunday.

Hit-and-run incidents are also on the increase, and the number of families who are being forced out of their homes and from their livelihoods is escalating.

Those who took the brave and caring decision to police our community, to care for the ill and take them to hospital, to fight our fires with little thought for their personal safety, and to serve by teaching the young are now named as legitimate targets by the different organisations that wish to keep intact their reigns of terror and influence.

Why do we allow that to happen? It used to be the proud boast of those who lived on the Falls and the Shankill — and I remember it personally — that they could leave their doors unlocked, and move about freely and undisturbed. That is no longer so.

Taxi, bus and rail drivers are another group who have tried to carry on with their jobs while under almost permanent threat. Increasingly, they come under direct attack. In my days as co-ordinator of the Peace Train organisation, I saw at first hand the risks that some of those people took to ensure that we could travel in safety. The organisation was wound up some years ago in the hope that that phase had ended with the ceasefires. However, it clearly has not ended.

The frightening aspect of the rapid rise in widespread violence and intimidation is that it is not all paramilitary-based. Young people, who have not been taught any discipline or control when dealing with others, are to blame. We were concerned that, following the ceasefires, the men and women of violence would turn to activities such as drug trafficking to maintain their lifestyles and influence. I am sorry to say that that has happened.

I am convinced that it was society's initial ignorance of how to deal with the situation and achieve relative normality that gave the lawbreakers no motivation to mend their ways. No attempt was made to encourage a more considerate and lawful lifestyle. No respect has been shown to others, and there has been no sign of the development of any self-control. We have almost ended up with a free-for-all.

The most obvious example of that is the way in which the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has been thoroughly demoralised through being treated, by most sides, as a party political football. Is it any wonder that our policemen and women are so concerned that, because of the questionable tactics of the main parties, the majority of the public have, so far, failed to adopt the PSNI in the way that was anticipated? As a direct result of that politicking, and because of the refusal of some to encourage enrolment, it has taken much longer than it should have done for the PSNI to recruit sufficient numbers to maintain satisfactory manpower levels to deal with the many areas of conflict, not least in north Belfast.

While the Police Service looks for support and recruits, the leaders of the largest parties tend to cry crocodile tears for the men and women whom they claim to support. It is to the PSNI's credit that it continues to work for all people, even in the face of death threats, blast bombs, spitting and personal abuse of the most vicious and filthy nature. All PSNI members may not be perfect, but those who oppose them are invariably greatly distanced from perfection themselves.

Local PSNI sections have also felt the pressure of increased burglaries and attacks, and, as is the case in my constituency, several recent murders. However, they have drawn up plans of action to meet the needs of the communities that they serve. That action, and the resources that are made available to them, must be

greatly increased in the near future. I am sorry to say that we are not in the safety area that Patten envisaged.

For far too long, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has called for new, more up to date ambulances and equipment. In spite of some improvements, it remains under-resourced for both personnel and finance. It answers all calls, an unacceptable number of which are hoaxes, and, until a few years ago, it would have been unthinkable that its work would be hindered in any way. However, we were brought out of our complacency several weeks ago by an attack — one of many — that resulted in a brick's being thrown through the windscreen of a speeding ambulance.

What sort of reasoning led to that act? Did the person who threw the brick not realise what could have happened? We must fully support those workers and deal severely with anyone caught displaying such false bravado. Similarly, what went through the minds of the young boys who threw a brick at the driver of a Northern Ireland Railways' train? Luckily, although the train was moving, it was not travelling fast and the driver was able to come to a halt, before receiving medical help. What would have happened if it had been an express train? The carriages would invariably have been crowded with homeward-bound schoolchildren and workers.

12.15 pm

Last week, my niece went to the funeral of a teaching colleague. Three weeks ago, he shouted at a pupil who was disrupting the class. The pupil threw a stone, which he just happened to have, at the teacher. It hit him on the temple. He recovered from the initial shock, but had to take leave for stress. Last week, he was buried. He left a wife and three children, one of whom suffers from Down's syndrome, another of whom has severe hearing difficulties. What is our society coming to when such things are happening?

I cited those examples because we cannot point out often enough what is happening in our midst. If we do not come together as a society with a common purpose, the terror will not only continue, it will steadily worsen. The Assembly's remit does not yet include justice and security. However, we have been elected to take a lead. We must stop putting political interests before society. We should stop referring to men, women or children as "Loyalist", "Republican", "Catholic" or "Protestant". We should refer to people as fellow citizens, human beings or Northern Irish people. Everyone must be on a level playing field.

We must stand squarely with the public services against the purveyors of hatred and intimidation. The problem is not only theirs — it is ours too. We have a common enemy, if only we would recognise it as such. Only when we work together to bring respect to all citizens, can we pursue our own road to peace and safety. It can be done. The peace organisations in the

beleaguered communities faced the local "hoods", as we called them, with common purpose and confidence during the troubles. We marched and attended peace rallies, such as those held on Friday 18 January, and eventually we brought it home to them that people want peace, stability and hope. Those priorities come far ahead of territorial aspirations.

The Good Friday Agreement is not responsible for the law and order problems in Northern Ireland. The agreement provides the means to tackle the problem, through establishing the primacy of democracy, human rights and the law. We must deal with division and inequality as the precursor to achieving real democracy, real human rights and the full implementation of the rule of law. Those are not contradictory aims; they go hand in hand. Human rights cannot be achieved without the rule of law, and the rule of law cannot mean anything without democracy — they are interdependent. Together we must tackle the increasing level of lawlessness and the negative attitude to the rule of law, for the benefit of everyone. It is up to the state, the political processes and civil society to adopt a positive approach to upholding the law.

Because of the level of violence and the increasing influence of paramilitaries, people do not have confidence in the judicial system. Therefore, we must establish a criminal justice strategy that has sufficient resources to enable the police, Customs and Excise, and all other organs of the state to tackle the wide range of offences and the threats that are felt in our communities. Rioting, intimidation and drugs must be eradicated as a first step towards normality. The preservation of the rule of law must top everyone's agenda. All politicians must be seen to give a very public lead at every possible opportunity. Politicians must act together, not as political parties.

Sufficient resources must be made available to all organisations that tackle those problems at the coalface, from the PSNI, the Ambulance Service and the Fire Service, to schools and community groups. That will enable the work to be done. We must all be seen to be tackling sectarianism and intimidation head-on. We must cast aside the annual idiocy of controversy over graffiti, parades and flags. Those must be forgotten once and for all, and consensus must be reached.

We must be seen to be helping victims rather than increasing the number of victims by upholding traditional medieval practices. We must strive for an overarching sense of community identity that embraces all cultures without offending any. We must engender respect for all. While we talk and disagree about issues that do not matter in the wider scheme of things, the paramilitaries flourish. Parents must assume full responsibility for the actions of their children; they must teach respect for others. Anyone who listened to the radio this

morning would have heard those views being echoed by other people.

I appeal directly to the Secretary of State. There is nothing new in my speech — he knows as much about what is happening as we do. He stated recently that the hate agenda must fail. That will happen only if we support fully the organisations that I have mentioned, which will help in turn to create a more peaceful and stable society. Rallies and the right words are great, but what we need is positive consensual action.

Dr Reid also pledges to do all he can to secure a better future for all. The Assembly asks him to do just that by providing sufficient resources to tackle the wider problem. As Members, we pledge that we shall work with all sections of society to make a better life for all, thereby reducing the motivations of those who riot, steal and attack. The message must be clear — we need immediate action and immediate resources. We are at the point when we can either overcome those problems, or we can go under completely.

Mr Speaker: I would like to make two points before I call the next Member. First, I have listened carefully to what Mrs Bell, the mover of the motion, has said. However, I draw her attention, and all Members' attention, to the specific terms of the motion. The motion refers to the issue of resources, and the Speaker must draw that to the attention of Members, including the mover. Members must also note that the debate must not range over a wider field to the point where the specific issue in the motion is little referred to.

Secondly, the debate must finish by 2.30 pm, and many Members have already indicated that they wish to speak. Therefore, I must restrict each Member's time to no more than eight minutes.

Dr Birnie: I welcome the motion and congratulate the Alliance Party for moving it. I hope to adapt the Prime Minister's phrase of a few years ago that his Government aim to be tough on criminals and on the causes of criminality. We all know that there is a problem. The situation is serious, although perhaps it is not yet the case that there has been a breakdown in law and order, albeit that some localities are heading in that direction.

According to police figures, in the south Belfast district command unit in my constituency, between 1999-2000 and the following year, burglaries rose by 19%, and robberies by 36% — an increase of more than one third. The National Federation of Retail Newsagents has impressed on me, as a constituency representative, that it is under severe pressure because many of its members have been attacked and robbed, not once but repeatedly, over many months, and often threateningly and violently. General crime figures are rising, especially crimes against property, although fortunately that is not necessarily true for all categories of crime. Again, using police statistics, between 1999-2000 and the

following year, offences against the person declined in the so-called urban region of Greater Belfast, south Antrim and north Down.

What is to be done, bearing in mind the Speaker's instruction about resourcing issues? There is the wider application of CCTV, which has been installed in Belfast city centre and in some other town centres. There is evidence that CCTV has had some impact on crime, although admittedly it may also simply displace it to the suburbs and the streets not similarly covered. We must consider police numbers, which is a subject that some people have used as a political football. The total nominal strength of the police service has reduced, but not by as much as is sometimes suggested. In 1996, according to police statistics, there were 12,830 officers. That had declined to 11,459 in 2000-01, and there have been some further reductions since. Additional to that reduction, there has been a decline in the effective strength of the service due to sickness and absence. Nevertheless, taking all of that into account, the number of police officers per head of population here is still markedly greater than for any city in Great Britain. It stands at roughly one officer for every 170 people, compared with one officer for every 285 people in Greater London and one officer for every 545 people in Sheffield. I hope that Assembly Colleagues on the Northern Ireland Policing Board will address the allocation and management of police strength cost effectively.

The police service is labouring in a difficult situation. There is still an appreciable threat of terrorism, and large-scale public order problems, notably in north Belfast have drawn police strength from other areas and left openings for criminality. The civilianisation of back-up services should be encouraged — especially the administrative services in police stations — to allow more bobbies to be on the beat.

Shopkeepers, who have repeatedly suffered attacks, have impressed on me that they fear that judges and magistrates have not sufficiently recognised the seriousness of crime against property. I recognise that that is Westminster's responsibility, and on that point I agree with Mrs Bell that devolution of power on law and order to this House would be welcome.

A rise in crime — especially violent crime — is regrettably a general phenomenon found in almost every Western society. Therefore, to blame it on the 1998 agreement seems simplistic. As recently as this morning on 'Good Morning Ulster', it was noted that much of the background criminality is generated by youths who are technically children. Moreover, if left to their own devices, they will tend to become the hard core criminals of the future. Sometimes, perhaps rightly, we hear much about human rights. What about responsibilities, which should always balance rights? In particular, what about the responsibility of parents?

Do they know where their teenage sons are? I say "sons" deliberately because most of this crime is a male phenomenon.

Sadly, we have the ridiculous situation in which the Office of Law Reform in the Department of Finance and Personnel is leaning towards an attempt to criminalise parents who use reasonable means to chastise their children — the so-called smacking debate. However, we lack the will to discipline the youths who create so much trouble on our streets. There are broader issues of attitude, which go beyond politics, as well as the particular points about resourcing raised in the motion.

I support the motion.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair)

12.30 pm

Mrs Courtney: I too support the motion and congratulate Eileen Bell and Kieran McCarthy for bringing the problem to the Assembly's attention. We have seen the escalation of violence in all constituencies, with almost daily attacks on our ambulance and fire crews, bus and train personnel, the elderly and children.

One of the most recent attacks in my constituency was a serious sexual assault on a young woman in the grounds of Altnagelvin Hospital. Apart from street violence, these attacks seem to be part and parcel of our daily lives. There is lawlessness about a society if the emergency services are fair game for thugs who take pleasure in throwing stones, bricks, bottles and other missiles at their vehicles. For example, there have been more than 100 attacks on the emergency services in Derry since the start of the year.

In September 2001 Derry City Council invited representatives of the fire and ambulance services to make a presentation, detailing such attacks. Both services gave a catalogued list of occasions on which emergency crews were unable to attend to 999 calls because of such incidents. In the city centre ambulance crews were attacked by a hostile crowd and prevented from giving first aid. In other incidents fire crews were stoned, and they narrowly escaped injury when bottles were thrown at the driver of the vehicle. In one incident only the driver's skill prevented the vehicle from going out of control and causing further injuries to pedestrians. Last night a fire crew, on its way to attend to a fire, was stoned in the Shantallow area. Thankfully nobody was injured. It is only by the grace of God and the good will and good skills of the drivers that more injuries do not occur.

Also in Derry, a young woman bus driver was stopped and ordered out of the vehicle. Money was taken from her, and the bus was burned. It is little wonder that Ulsterbus has to take preventative measures and stop bus services, at least temporarily. Not so long ago, also in my city, a vigilante warned members of an

ambulance crew, who were attending to injured people, that if they sent for the police, they would be attacked. That is an example of how society has broken down. There was a public rally that called for such attacks on services to stop. That helped but did not stop further violence.

Hospital attacks, which have been so vicious in last few months, even in my city, have not been included in my consideration so far. Headlines such as these continue to be the order of the day: 15 January, "Politician Slams School Attacks"; 21 January, "Brutal Hospital Fight Slammed"; 21 January again, "Emergency Crews Attacked"; 22 January, "Police Hunt Hospital Sex Attacker"; 25 January, "Translink in Bid to Stop Bus Attacks"; and on 23 January, "Escalation of Attacks on the Elderly Warning". Last night an 81-year-old woman and a 92-year-old woman were attacked in their homes.

One of the headlines that I saw recently was "Footballer's Dad Slams Attack Thugs", which is only one incident when street violence seemed to be the order of the day. That headline referred to the unprovoked attack on a young Ballymena footballer, Kevin Duff, aged 17 years. Not only was he viciously attacked and beaten by a gang of four, but he had part of his ear bitten off. He is probably still receiving emergency treatment.

Those are all vicious attacks, which have led to the loss of morale among all public service workers, leaving ambulance men and women, fire crews, busmen, doctors and nurses afraid to go to work. In the midst of it all, we still have sectarian violence, which culminated recently in the sickening death of the young postal worker, Danny McColgan. Following that we saw the headline "300,000 UK Postal Workers Pay Silent Tribute to Danny". Indeed, we all paid tribute to Danny, but if the wave of revulsion that spread through the community that day does not continue, another innocent life will be lost.

We have had too many killings, and I do not intend to highlight many more. Suffice it to say that deliberate attacks using syringes full of blood on police officers and others, necessitating their having to have HIV tests are among the most sickening.

A County Antrim ambulance man was headbutted and had his nose broken. People felt disgusted when they saw that the young fellow who committed the assault received only a £200 fine, £150 of which was to be given to the ambulance man in compensation — a 62-year-old man who had worked all of his life. He said that if he met the fellow, he would tell him what to do with the £150.

We need a strong deterrent if we are to overcome this culture of violence. Fines are not enough. More money must be put into the police service if we are

going to stop these attacks; a point that was mentioned in the motion. A custodial sentence seems to be the only answer.

Excess drink is often the excuse put forward for violence in hospitals. Drink is never a reason for violence; it is only an excuse. One reason is that the culprits want to fight. Custodial sentences must be mandatory for attacks on hospital personnel and to stop this type of violence in society.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The motion is in two parts. The first part is condemnatory, and my party associates itself totally with that. Most Members are aware of people in Northern Ireland who have been attacked and suffered because of what has been called “this culture of violence” and the breakdown in law and order. This must be condemned roundly, and our sympathy must go to those who have been attacked.

The second part of the motion, which we can also support, deals with allocating sufficient resources to the police service. Some truth must be injected into the debate. Everyone on the anti-agreement side of the House could say “We told you so”. During the referendum, we said that there would be a breakdown in law and order as a result of bringing the agreement into place, and we were ridiculed. We were told that we were engaging in scare tactics. It has come to fruition.

Mr J Kelly: By whom was it being orchestrated?

Mr Paisley Jnr: Someone has shouted “orchestrated”: I cannot orchestrate IRA violence. I cannot orchestrate the 137 shootings that took place last year by the guns of the Provisional IRA and their people in this country. That Member well knows that.

We did tell you so. However, it is not good enough; because the House must now deal with the consequences. It is unfair and complete nonsense to compare the situation in Northern Ireland with Sheffield. Vast rural parts of Northern Ireland have been compared with Sheffield. The breakdown in law and order — in which people can use those rural areas as a backdrop for their crimes — cannot be compared with Sheffield. An organised task force in the police has identified another problem that does not exist in Sheffield — paramilitarism — yet it is a major feature in their identification of the problem.

Some honesty must be injected into the debate; people should not skirt around the issues by saying that they are opposed to crime, that it is terrible and then hope that the debate goes away. The debate is timely; I congratulate the Alliance Party for getting it on the agenda, but some people on the other side of the House resent the fact that we are going to see some truth and some consequences for people’s actions.

People must face the consequences of their actions. If they support a system that reduces the number of

police officers and then girm about crime being on the increase and police detection rates going down, they must take the consequences of their action to support a reduction in the number of police officers. Many people cry about a culture of violence — I have heard that term used in the debate — when a system has been created in which gunmen and criminals have been let out of jail. What such people do when they get out of jail does not matter; they may become the most law-abiding of people, but it creates a society where people think that one can get away with murder — and many of them have.

Another system has been created — one in which the gunmen have been put into the Government of Northern Ireland. Some boast about it saying, “I was a commander of the Provisional IRA in Londonderry during Bloody Sunday” — then he is in Government. What type of message does that send out to young people who, it has been said, are the real culprits? Those young people might feel that if he can get away with it, so can they.

We have a system in which a party in Government refuses to call on people to give evidence to the police. We have a party in Government which refuses to tell people to give evidence so that criminals can be convicted. What sort of message does that send out to society? Then we wonder why we have a culture of crime. We have a party in Government that not only refuses to support the police but calls for them to be treated in the same way as they were treated by Republicans during 30 years of troubles. The leader of Sinn Féin said that — *[Interruption]*.

Dr Birnie: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: I do not have the time to give way — as the Member rightly knows.

We have a situation where the leader of one party in Government quite happily encourages people to go on the offensive against police officers, whether those police officers are Nationalist or Unionist, or whether they see themselves as British or Irish. We are getting to the real crux of the issue. The attacks on the police over the past 30 years have not been about whether it is a British police force, or whether the police officers are Protestant or Catholic — they have been because the attackers were anti-law and order, and for crime. *[Interruption]*.

Some Members are getting upset. Perhaps the cap fits them too well. *[Interruption]*. We have another situation where another party — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If Members want to make remarks they should address them through the Chair.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Another party in another place employs a terrorist killer as its chief adviser, yet we wonder why crime is on the increase. The House

should face the consequences of its actions. If you create that system, you have to live with its consequences. Clearly today Members are not prepared to live with them.

Let us look at the crime picture in Northern Ireland. Many Members have said that it is frightening, and I agree. Armed robberies are on the increase. There were 450 more armed robberies in the last 12 months than in the previous 12, netting £6.5 million for the criminals. Much of that has gone into the coffers of the IRA and other organisations, and is used in criminality. Attacks on persons are on the increase. Paramilitary shootings have increased — there were 137 last year — and there have been 225 beatings by paramilitaries.

There have been attacks on the police. Some people have said that there is a problem with sickness levels in the police and that that is why we have crime. In other words, crime is the fault of police officers, because some of them are sick. Fourteen hundred and fifty officers happen to be sick because they are injured — injured by criminals. People do not want to say that, because they cannot identify this society with injuring people. But that is exactly what has happened.

Motor theft is on the increase. Over 11,000 vehicles were broken into, damaged or stolen last year. Drug crime has also increased massively. Eighty-seven thousand crimes were reported to the police last year. That is a 10% increase on the previous year, and a 15% increase on the year before that. Why? Does the Belfast Agreement not have something to do with it? Are people not prepared to face some of the consequences of their actions? They should be.

During this period there has been a sharp decrease — 18% — in the ability of the police to apprehend criminals and bring them to justice. Why is that? It is because police manpower has also decreased. It is interesting to see that the decreased levels are running at a similar level. We have had 99 killings in the last two years, and only one conviction. People must be very alarmed at that.

The second part of the motion deals with resources. There is a massive shortfall in resources, and I hope that the motion shows the Secretary of State that we want to see the £40 million deficit addressed — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I will. The police are currently running at a £40 million deficit, and we want to see that deficit addressed. I hope that through Members supporting the motion we will see an increase in funding for the police that will bring funding up to the level required to ensure that policing runs effectively, so that we have more people and so that the Patten

Report cannot be implemented in the way that people wanted it implemented.

Mr G Kelly: The motion is somewhat confusing. It calls for resources for the PSNI, but it lumps a reference to postal workers, ambulance staff and other services in with that. My party will not support the motion, because we believe that putting more resources into a police force that is not representative, that is still under partisan political control and that is not properly accountable is the wrong thing to do.

12.45 pm

The motion is divided in a way that can be easily identified. Like Annie Courtney, I have spoken to the staff and management of the Fire Brigade and the Ambulance Service in north Belfast. Many of the incidents described are not matters for the police. They can be addressed through adequate resources in the community. At the meeting it was agreed that more communication between these services and schools, community organisations and political leaders was needed.

We have to differentiate between attacks of a sectarian nature and sporadic attacks on fire crews and ambulances. I have been told that there is not a massive rise in sporadic attacks, in spite of their having had a high profile in recent months. Resources would be better used to highlight the work that the fire and ambulance services have been doing for the last 30 years and show that they are neutral. A community safety relations officer for these services, for instance, would help to create a better understanding. The vast majority know that these are caring people doing very dangerous jobs.

Against the background of the call for more support for the PSNI, there have been some 300 bomb and gun attacks in the last year. People in Catholic areas do not believe that the PSNI is a representative or accountable organisation. The revelations of the last few weeks about Special Branch, a force within a force, do not give people more confidence that the PSNI will be fair or impartial. Indeed, people are worried that if more resources are given to the PSNI, they will go to the very part of the organisation that will be used against Nationalists, which is Special Branch. What will that money be used for? It will certainly not be used to protect Nationalists.

People are worried that informers and Special Branch agents run the UDA, which has carried out the bulk of recent attacks. In the well-documented Finucane case, the person in charge of the attack, Tommy Lyttle, was a Special Branch agent. The person who handed over the weapons, William Stobie, was a Special Branch agent. One of the people who confessed to the murder, Ken Barrett, was a Special Branch agent. Another agent, Brian Nelson, was in charge of bringing the weapons into the country. How can people stand up and argue that more resources should be given to what is a

repackaged RUC? How can that deal with the current situation? North Belfast, which I represent, has been mentioned on a number of occasions. I can tell you that whatever resources are going in there are not going to protect the Nationalist people.

What we need and what we have repeatedly argued for is proper legislation and the full implementation of the Patten Report. The British Government have admitted that they did not do that and that amending legislation is possible. We want to see that amending legislation, and we want NIO and the British Secretary of State to produce it. Let us deal with the new beginning to policing that we were promised and that was agreed in the Good Friday Agreement and the Patten Report.

I stand against the motion on the basis that it would put money into the wrong area, and while it lumps several issues together, it does not deal effectively with the matters in hand. It is all over the place. Many of the problems are not policing matters, and we do not have a proper police force for the problems that are.

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it not appropriate that when a Member speaks on a motion concerned with the breakdown of law and order, he should declare an interest where it is relevant, and if individual Members have previously been involved in illegal activities, they should be declared?

Mr Boyd: I find it disgusting that Gerry Kelly is talking on a motion on law and order and about attacks on post office workers when his Assembly Colleague, Gerry McHugh, was convicted of the murder of a postman. That should be put clearly on the record. I want to highlight — *[Interruption]*.

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is he talking about Assembly Member Gerry McHugh?

Mr Boyd: I want to highlight — *[Interruption]*.

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want clarification on whether the Member is talking about Assembly Member Gerry McHugh's being convicted of the murder of a postal officer.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will you confirm what you have just said, Mr Boyd? Is this true or not?

Mr Boyd: I want to make it clear that the Assembly Member Gerry McHugh, a party Colleague of Gerry Kelly, was convicted of the murder of a postal worker.

Mr J Kelly: *rose*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please sit down. I call — *[Interruption]*.

Mr J Kelly: On a further point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please sit down.

Mr J Kelly: Very well, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Boyd: I want to highlight some of the crimes committed in my constituency and to demonstrate how low the perpetrators have stooped to commit them. Sadly these crimes are mirrored throughout Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. I live in Newtownabbey, which is a few miles from Carnmoney cemetery. Every Sunday, in all weathers, a young person sits at the gate selling flowers to relatives and loved ones who are visiting graves. However, even cemeteries are not exempt from criminals; a car pulled up, robbed the young person and then sped off.

In the past 12 months, thugs with screwdrivers have assaulted and robbed several old-age pensioners. In the past 12 months a small retail unit in Glengormley was ram-raided, and the proprietor lost thousands of pounds worth of stock. In the past few months the shop was robbed again at knifepoint and thousands of pounds worth of stock was taken. The owner has also been visited by so-called Loyalist paramilitaries for the purposes of extortion, and they have threatened his family. His family are solid Unionists and law-abiding citizens.

Last year, a garage was robbed three times in one month and was forced to close. A contractor was working on houses in a Protestant area and was approached for the purposes of extortion by a group of men claiming to be from a Loyalist paramilitary organisation. Next day another group of men approached him claiming to be from a different so-called Loyalist paramilitary organisation.

The people who suffer are the decent law-abiding citizens of the area. Recently I spoke to a constituent who is a Protestant businessman. Paramilitaries went to his premises in Belfast and demanded £4,000. He refused to hand over the money, and, at great danger to himself and his family, he helped the police to catch the criminals in an undercover operation in which few would have had the courage to be involved. However, he had to close the business that he had set up for his son to run when he left school. The business was doing well, but it had to close for obvious reasons. The son, who is only 18, is now on income support. I wrote to the Security Minister, Jane Kennedy, and she referred the matter to the Compensation Agency. The agency could do nothing as there had been no criminal damage to the business premises. This graphically illustrates how the Government and its agencies have failed innocent victims, yet millions of pounds are allocated to prisoners.

In October 2000 an armed man robbed the Antrim Credit Union; he assaulted two female staff and

escaped with £7,400. At his court case last year the police opposed bail on the grounds that he would not appear for his trial. In October 2001 he was sentenced to only three years for a violent armed robbery.

Mr McHugh: On a point of order, A LeasCheann Comhairle. I ask the Member to withdraw the allegation that he has made against me.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Boyd, you should look at some of the decisions taken by the Speaker in the Chamber. Rulings were given on 18 December 2000 and 24 April 2001 for cases where one Member is named by another and allegations are made. Guidance is also given on page 312 of 'Erskine May', and the Member may wish to see that. Members must seek the leave of, and submit a proposed statement to, the Speaker in relation to their intention to name a Member. Therefore, I rule that such statements are out of order unless the person named has an opportunity to make reply. A right of reply must be cleared with the Speaker beforehand.

Mr McHugh: A LeasCheann Comhairle, further to the point of order, I want the record to show that the allegation is completely untrue. It is a scurrilous allegation, which is dangerous to me and others, and I want it withdrawn.

Mr Boyd: In October 2001, a criminal was sentenced to only three years for a violent armed robbery, despite the police opposing bail at his trial. He was given Christmas leave — *[Interruption]*.

Mr McHugh: A LeasCheann Comhairle, on a point of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have already described what the action must be by the Member naming.

Mr McHugh: A LeasCheann Comhairle, I am requiring that the Member withdraw his remarks. Unless he has proof, I want them withdrawn. It is as simple as that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Boyd, I read out what the procedure is, and you heard it too. If someone is named, that person has the right of reply, and that can be given only by reference to the Speaker, so be careful.

Mr J Kelly: A LeasCheann Comhairle, on a further point of order, a serious allegation has been made about my Colleague, Gerry McHugh, which endangers his life and that of his family. A Member has made the allegation in the Chamber that he was convicted and sentenced for the murder of a postal worker. That is fundamentally and patently untrue, and he is asking that that Member withdraw it. That is a fair request.

Mr Deputy Speaker: For the third time, I remind you, Mr Boyd of the procedure. Having been warned once you have continued. Do not continue naming Members of the House. Is that clear? Do not continue; otherwise I will have to name you.

Dr O'Hagan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, as the Speaker of the House are you going to ask Mr Norman Boyd to withdraw his comments about Gerry McHugh?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will you withdraw that comment, Mr Boyd?

Mr Boyd: Absolutely not, Mr Deputy Speaker, I stand by my comments.

Mr Deputy Speaker: In that case I will have to name the Member. I have made an order, and you, Mr Boyd, have not obeyed it. I name you, and you may leave the Chamber.

The Member withdrew from the Chamber

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I do not think that this is the correct way to proceed. I ask that you do not take the course of action that you have suggested. I do not think that procedurally this is correct. Mr McHugh or the Sinn Féin Members may wish to challenge the comments made by my Colleague, but this is neither the time nor the place for that matter to be dealt with. Mr Boyd is addressing the motion, and I do not see any reason why he should be named or expelled from the Chamber. I ask you to reconsider.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have made my decision, and I stand by it.

Mr Ervine: I support the motion — with the caveat that it has left out one section of our society which has suffered a lot. In recent years there have been many statistics to prove how difficult it is for the Northern Ireland Fire Service to do its job. I imagine that it is by accident that it did not achieve some prominence in the motion, and that is regrettable.

Nevertheless, we have had interesting moments, such as the Sinn Féin assertion that the people who are named in the motion should never be protected until such times that there is a police service to their specific liking. In other words, what is happening is perfectly all right until there is a police service that they like.

If I were serving the public I would have some sense of grievance about that, especially at a time when phone calls to the Police Service of Northern Ireland from the Nationalist community are mounting because callers feel they are under threat. They are, and have been making calls to the RUC, and they have been looking for help from whatever source they can get it at a time when lawlessness is rife in this society.

1.00 pm

Sinn Féin's position is pathetic, almost childish. We, as Members of the Assembly, face an onerous task. We are discussing a matter, for which the responsibility rests with Westminster. We shall take on the issues of

policing and justice on the day that our Assembly comes of age. Then we shall be accountable and able to face the public in the knowledge that we shall be making the decisions on how they are protected in their homes, on the streets and in the schools.

My constituency office can identify a footfall of 40% of those who seek assistance with lawlessness. Members have referred to armed robbery, and to the shameful and terrible acts in which there is undoubtedly paramilitary involvement. In the housing estates of the working-class areas of my constituency, people are suffering more acutely from the actions of young children — adolescents who are terrorising people day and night. The police are unable to do much about that. It seems like a game — the children attack the elderly, who seek assistance, but when that help eventually comes, the children run away. It is all about having a chase and watching a big burly policeman chase a 10-year-old up the street.

Perhaps we need to become more radical — does someone else need to deal with the job? When we can make legislation, should we enact legislation that will make parents responsible for the behaviour of their children? Do we need a specially designated group of people — not the police — who, on behalf of society, will pluck those children off the streets and follow through, fairly ruthlessly, the requirement that parents stop neglecting them. Undoubtedly, children are allowed to behave badly because of parental neglect, and society has a responsibility to ensure that parents accept that they are responsible and accountable for their children.

Dr Birnie: I agree entirely with Mr Ervine's sentiments about parental responsibility. However, what sanctions should parents be allowed to use, given that a proposal is being put forward that the Northern Ireland Assembly should follow the example of the Scottish Executive and ban "reasonable chastisement" on the parents' part, although Westminster has not done so?

Mr Ervine: The Member is taking me up an avenue that I had not anticipated travelling. It is, however, a worthy point. Whether we like it or not, any violent action, legal or otherwise, affects the generation that experiences the violence. The state should have a non-violent approach to children. Neither parents nor any other lawful authority should have the right to beat children. I have heard it said that "A beating wouldn't do you a button of harm — it never did me any". That is when a trustworthy person is administering the beating. What happens when someone who cannot be trusted beats his child half to death? Then the state needs to deal with the problem.

There are many role models in society for anti-authority attitudes. There are many such people in the Chamber, including myself, all the paramilitarists and all the protestors against one sort of authority or

another. We need to wake up and recognise that we have effectively shown the generation causing our nightmares that it is perfectly all right to rail against authority. We are trying to inch towards a democratic and political solution, and that violent backdrop is part of the problem.

However, we must all take responsibility. Some people simply luxuriate in the fact that their constituents suffer pain and sorrow. They climb all over the issue to gain votes, and that is tragic. They indulge in point scoring and playing games, rather than offering practical solutions to a problem that is a nightmare to those on the receiving end.

I live on a housing estate that is situated close to Parliament Buildings. Three quarters of that estate is a fine and decent place in which to live. One quarter of it is like Beirut — no one wants to go there, and everyone wants to get out. It is extremely moving to hear about older people who have lived there for a long time while the shifting sands of bad behaviour have surrounded them. It is debilitating for them, and it is shameful that they should have to live in such circumstances.

We must find the resources to ensure that our police officers can respond to crime. The issue must be given serious political support. Perhaps it is time to think about the creation of a policy of zero tolerance.

Ms McWilliams: I find it difficult to speak on the motion. Perhaps it would have been better had there been two separate motions, because too many issues have been listed in the motion. I have split my speech into two areas: what can be done for the elderly and what can be done for service providers.

The elderly are citizens of our community, and they deserve to be protected from further attacks. If we are to respond to the problem by providing more resources, we must identify our areas of responsibility and what the Assembly should ask of the Executive.

I represent the constituency of South Belfast, which, according to last year's crime statistics, has the highest crime rate in Northern Ireland. However, I wish to put those figures into perspective. I have examined the crime statistics for the UK. It still seems to be the case that, although our crime figures are increasing relative to a baseline, our figures for theft, burglary, violence against the person and criminal damage are lower than those elsewhere in the UK. Let us keep that in perspective.

If the crime figures are rising, we must ask why that is the case. Different political arguments have been voiced today. Some Members have associated rising crime with events resulting from the Belfast Agreement. However, it may also be the case that societies that are in post-conflict or transitional situations are very

different to those at the height of conflict. Undoubtedly, at the height of the conflict, crime in communities was heavily contained, and there was a high level of surveillance. People did not have the same permission that they currently have now that that surveillance has been lifted, whether by the police or by the paramilitaries.

There is now a higher level of mobility, because, in the past, every stolen car was a potential bomb threat. With such permission, individuals think that they have the right to indulge in crime. We may need to consider the type of measures that we put in place.

I have spoken to many police officers who tell me that they cannot walk that road alone. There is one police officer for every 153 persons in Northern Ireland; by contrast, there is one police officer for every 431 persons in England and every 443 persons in Wales. It is clear that Northern Ireland has a higher proportion of police than elsewhere, and to call for additional resources may not go down well in devolved Administration. Therefore, ways of policing our community must be examined. I want to put that issue on the table; communities should look at policing differently.

As political representatives — working with residents associations and agencies — we are capable of reorienting our thinking about policing. It is not simply about catching offenders or about prosecutions. The recidivism rates do not point to success in tackling the problems. A different approach must be taken. The way forward is contained in many of the police's proposals on community safety and community policing.

I want to take up the debate about finding ways to tackle aggressive behaviour, especially among young people. The current 'Children are Unbeatable' campaign speaks of alternative ways of discipline. If we teach our children unacceptable ways of discipline they will reciprocate. If they are taught that other ways exist to deal with aggression, it is to be hoped that we shall raise children who are different and we shall create a different type of community. The forthcoming legislation will make us think differently and change our attitudes.

The Assembly can do something about service providers. The Executive have told the House that they have an interdepartmental strategy to tackle problems. Perhaps the Victims Unit should deal not only with the victims of the troubles but lend some of its expertise to dealing with the victims among personnel in the Executive's Departments. I propose that the Executive set up a task force immediately to deal with violence against the service providers for whom they are responsible. They must state their definition of violence against those people, who are subject to intimidation, harassment and the everyday swearing and shouting that eventually leads to abuse and assaults.

There should, by now, be an accurate baseline of the number of attacks. Why should it be left to journalists to produce that? The background papers for today's debate show the huge number of attacks. There were 410 cases in Belfast City Hospital alone. That is more than one attack for every day of the year. The Assembly should set a target that, by December 2002, it will know what the baseline is and that, by December 2005, it will have reduced that baseline by 25%. Those messages must be taken responsibly out of the Assembly and into the community. The Assembly should publish a protocol for the sharing of information among the Fire Service, ambulance staff and social care providers. Are there examples of good practice that they could lend to one another? Is Northern Ireland different to elsewhere, and, if so, why?

There is a gender perspective to crime statistics for violence against the person. The highest incidence of violence against the person is carried out by people known to the victims. The victim often lives with the offender, who may be a family member. Strangers perpetrate the lowest incidence of violence against the person. The crazy legislation — the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 — is not sophisticated enough to break down crime, which has moved on since that legislation was enacted. It is good to see that, in the new language, joyriders are now referred to as "boy racers". Let the House name the problem as it is. Let the House also recognise that the vast majority of violence towards members of the community is perpetrated by aggressive males on vulnerable females. That is something that must be tackled in Northern Ireland now.

The Assembly must also remedy the significant gaps in crime prevention. It is encouraging to note that Translink has identified good practice elsewhere in the UK. For example, cash safety boxes can deter members of the public from attacking bus drivers, but why were they not introduced before? That is one small example of the type of measures that must be introduced. All public services should be reviewing their procedures. Let the Executive establish that task force as a result of today's debate.

1.15 pm

Mr McCartney: Several contributors have given detailed, anecdotal accounts of the sort of violence that is perpetrated in this society. We all accept that there has been a significant and serious rise in crime throughout Northern Ireland. However, I am disturbed by the nature of some of the contributions.

For example, Ulster Unionist Dr Birnie offered a sort of apologia for the violence, suggesting that it is not perhaps as bad as it is. He then told us that Northern Ireland is rather well served with regard to police/public ratios. That is simplistic in itself. It has already been pointed out that the nature of the topography and the

dispersed communities in Northern Ireland, and the nature of the violence that emanates from sectarian and paramilitary sources are entirely different from what is experienced by other police forces throughout the United Kingdom. His comparisons and the suggestion that we are well served, given the number of police, are absolutely unfounded, and absurd to the point of being ludicrous.

Mr Ervine's contribution suggested, in scarcely veiled terms, that male adolescent criminals should be dealt with more ruthlessly. He told us of the number of his constituents who complain to him. In many areas of Belfast, because of the breakdown in police morale, because of their lack of numbers and resources, and because they are not welcome in certain areas, the police are being ruthlessly supplanted by the sort of people who present themselves at Mr Ervine's constituency office.

We all know the tales of people who come to the UDA and the UVF or their political representatives, or to the IRA to talk about anti-social behaviour. That is dealt with in a much more ruthless way than any police force could administer. People who behave in an anti-social manner are taken out, warned and then brutally beaten. If they persist, they are shot in the ankles or the elbows. Those are fundamental joints, and such injuries destroy a person's capacity to make any useful employment contribution to the community in the future.

There is a suggestion that the police should not be doing that job; that other groups, unspecified by Mr Ervine, should take on community policing. No doubt such groups would espouse methods that would be condemned in any civilised society. No doubt they would be effective. Their methods were effective in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Gulags, where thugs administered what passed for justice.

Mr Gerry Kelly is a man not unversed in very serious violence. In a speech that varied between the unintelligible and the incomprehensible, he produced the usual Republican rant. It was the usual old record that the problem is all down to a police force that even in its revised form of the Police Service of Northern Ireland — the RUC having been denigrated, its numbers and morale decimated — is not delivering and ought not to be supported, resourced or funded. Everyone knows that Republicans, and Sinn Féin in particular, have turned wound licking into an art form. They continue to demonstrate their capacity in this form of complaint.

One can understand Monica McWilliams's attitude towards domestic male on female violence. However, much of that is the result of drugs and drink, broken-down relationships, common-law arrangements and having children in the one household with different fathers who are knocked about by drunken males.

I have a great deal of sympathy for what she says, but much of that stems from an unstable political society,

rendered more unstable by the effects — contrary to what Dr Birnie said — of the Belfast Agreement.

Dr Birnie: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: No, I will not give way. Where we have a police force whose morale has been destroyed, whose sacrifice and service to the public at large have been demeaned, there is a breakdown in morale. The police say: "Why should I go into the lion's den, when I am likely to be attacked on all sides by people now declared to be good and whose only claim to be currently good is that they were once positively and recognisably utterly vile?" However, people speak in a debate like this as if they were a combination of Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King and the local probation officer, and tell us what we all should be doing. They, of course, speak from great knowledge. Many of them were active in the deeds in the past that they currently condemn.

As far as resources are concerned, of course the police need more. Resources will not be the answer to the National Health Service problems in Great Britain and in Northern Ireland, although they will contribute to the answer. They will not be a total answer because reform is a necessity. There is a necessity for acceptance that the basis — and the most fundamental requirement — of any civilised society is the restoration of order. That has been abandoned in Northern Ireland in pursuit of the fruits of the Belfast Agreement. The Belfast Agreement was not a political settlement for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. It was conflict resolution between the British Government and violent Republicanism. That was the reason why paramilitaries on both sides were allowed to do what they were doing and why they continue to do. They had to be kept on board for political reasons, and we are now reaping the whirlwind that the Belfast Agreement and its terms sowed in this community. Until we look fundamentally at the terms of that agreement and what it has produced, we can throw all the resources we like at the problem, but we shall not solve it.

Mr Dalton: I largely support the motion as it stands, although I admit that the way in which it is phrased makes that somewhat difficult. Although there is no denying that there has been an extremely serious increase in crime in the past five years in Northern Ireland, in a sense I agree with my party Colleague that to characterise that as an entire breakdown in law and order is perhaps to exaggerate to a degree.

Concerning the contributions made by Ian Paisley Jnr and Robert McCartney, it would be absurd to suggest that the entire problem comes from the Belfast Agreement. Before the Belfast Agreement, Northern Ireland was a lovely place. No one's house was burgled, no one suffered any violence, and there was no crime. It is all the fault of the Belfast Agreement, and the

weather has also got worse since 1998. Everything that goes wrong in this society is the fault of the Belfast Agreement. If we had not signed the Belfast Agreement, this would never have happened. That is absurd.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dalton: No, not at this point. Try me again. This society endured serious conflict for 30 years. We have moved on from that situation. At any point of resolution of the political situation, it was inevitable that some of those involved in paramilitarism would move towards ordinary crime. Anyone who thinks that any possibility of a resolution of the political problem would not have led to an increase in crime is kidding himself. One followed the other inevitably.

Several paramilitary groups, such as the IRA, the UDA, the UVF and others, continue to be involved in serious crime — there is no doubt about that. There is also a large increase in the involvement of non-paramilitary groups in serious, organised crime in Northern Ireland, and that fact is borne out by senior police officers.

If we are to deal with the subject of the motion, we must agree that it is not simply a matter of allocating resources. Dr Birnie and others made the point that there are more police officers in Northern Ireland than in comparative areas of the UK. For people to suggest that Northern Ireland has a rural spread and, therefore, needs more police officers is ludicrous. Try to explain that to people who live in rural areas of Scotland or England. What — *[Interruption]*.

Mr McCartney: They were talking about paramilitaries.

Mr Dalton: There is organised crime in Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, London, Birmingham — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members should address their remarks through the Chair.

Mr Dalton: It is clear that all areas of the UK have problems with organised crime. It is something that afflicts societies throughout Europe and the United States.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to address the Chair, rather than engage in arguments with other Members.

Mr Dalton: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Weir: The Member indicated that he believes that crime has increased in Western Europe. Why, last week in the 'Belfast Telegraph', did he write that, because the situation in Northern Ireland has got so bad, he could no longer advise young people to stay here?

Mr Dalton: My advice was not based on an increase in crime. It related to the sense that young people have

about feeling part of a society in which they are valued, and in which we do not constantly spend our days debating and arguing about petty sectarian squabbles that go back almost 900 years. Frankly, Members such as the Member who just interjected have perpetuated that squabble and continue to perpetuate it. Members such as him will drive young people away from Northern Ireland for many years to come.

Mr Weir: I will drive you to the airport, Duncan.

Mr Dalton: You would need to get a better car.

Dr Birnie made the point that there are a significant number of extra police officers in Northern Ireland. However, the key issue is about how those resources are deployed. One of the faults with policing here is that no attempt has been made to move towards new ideas, such as increasing civilianisation.

In 1995, when I was working for the Police Authority, civilianisation was being tested. Since then, little progress has been made. It must be developed. It is clear that available police officers must be deployed on the ground. They should not be answering phones in inquiry offices, or sitting in collator's offices or process rooms filling in summons forms. Civilians could do those jobs at lesser cost, leaving police officers available for direct policing tasks.

It is important that the Chief Constable and the Northern Ireland Policing Board use the opportunity to persuade the Police Service of Northern Ireland to increase civilianisation and the use of resources.

Mr McCartney: I accept the valid point that the Member has made. However, would his suggestion include a substantial reduction in the number of police officers who are on duty guarding people, who, if we have a peace process, no longer require to be guarded? An example is the former Chief Constable, Sir John Herman who, I understand, has more officers guarding him than are guarding the entire population between Hollywood and Donaghadee.

Mr Dalton: I could not comment on the exact number of police officers available there. Police officers are still used in static duties, which is concerning. Many senior officers would say that their resources are often severely depleted by the fact that they must assign officers to static tasks such as guarding sangars and looking after VIPs. That is unfortunate. However, in a more stable political society one would hope that that would no longer be necessary.

However, we do not yet live in an entirely stable political society. We are moving towards that, but it will take a long time. I suspect that I will be drawing a pension before we get there.

1.30 pm

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Mr Paisley Jnr: That is encouraging.

Mr McCartney: The Member may be drawing an Assembly pension.

Mr Dalton: That is unlikely. The problems with law and order are not just matters for the police. Other parts of the criminal justice system must take follow-up action. It is important that the courts take a more proactive role. In large measure they have not been as robust as they could have been in sentencing offenders. The police are demoralised and do not want to bother chasing joyriders, because when they are taken to court the magistrates simply slap them on the wrists and tell them not to do it again and that they will see them in six months' time. Such work is pointless for those officers — it demoralises them and renders the entire system a farce. This matter must be examined and raised at Westminster, unfortunately.

Citizens also have an extensive role to play in improving safety and security in society. It is vital that we all play our part.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member will draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Dalton: We can be the eyes of the police service, and we can use community organisations, neighbourhood watch organisations and other legal organisations to ensure that the police are given all the help that they can get.

Mr O'Neill: My party condemns the all-too-evident increase in violent attacks in our community recently. We all know that violence achieves nothing but destruction and that it incites fear, hatred and more violence. I do not need to preach to anyone here about the impact of violence. Unfortunately, we know only too well about that.

In my constituency of South Down it seems that the level of crime and vandalism is increasing and that incidents are standard occurrences at weekends in one or several of the major towns. Almost weekly I receive reports from constituents who have experience of such crime. Young, innocent people are beaten when out for the night; shopkeepers' premises are vandalised; elderly people are robbed and attacked in their homes; and gangs cause disruption and destruction.

On the night of Thursday 17 January, there was a punishment shooting in Rostrevor. One of my party colleagues was attacked on Friday night — the issue was well publicised. On Sunday, the premises of another of my party colleagues were vandalised in Warrenpoint, and on Sunday night, there was an incident involving hooded men and a gun in Ardglass. These incidents are happening in South Down, which has a distinguished record of low figures for such crime. We are not used to such incidents in South Down, and I mention it as

an indication of how things are developing, even in an area renowned for its peaceful stability.

I echo the call for resources to enable the PSNI to address effectively this escalating problem. It is no secret that adequate resources and commitment have not been available in recent months. It is also no secret that the level of sickness in the police force has been exceptionally high. In some areas it has caused a 50% reduction in manpower. In my constituency of South Down there is only one police car to cover the distance between the Castlewellan area and Kilkeel. How could one car effectively cover this zone, which is 30 miles wide and stretches some 15 miles either side of Newcastle?

Following the establishment of a fully accountable police service, I expect more resources to be available in areas that require them. Perhaps some thought should be given to an argument that has already been mentioned — the closure of police stations. There has been much debate about that. Surely in modern policing terms we should be looking at the role of police stations very differently. We should not look at them, as they are often viewed, as the last fortified outposts of the empire.

Modern policing demands greater policing involvement with the community and greater flexibility. This could be achieved by, for example, having police desks where people often congregate — in places such as shopping complexes. It will take time to consider the manpower consequences — for example, what it costs to put one police car out on patrol. Manpower should surely be on the streets rather than in police stations dealing with paperwork.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Member agree that a great many resources could be saved if the Government stopped wasting money? For example, £4 million is wasted on recruitment procedures that involve £12,500 being spent on each recruit. Does he accept that this is a waste of money that could be better used in his constituency or mine?

Mr O'Neill: I thank the Member for the interjection. I agree that money should be used to a good end, and money spent on recruitment is being put to a good end because it will produce an acceptable and accountable police service for the whole community. What I am talking about is looking at policing in modern terms, and much could be done by examining the areas I have just mentioned.

Many Members mentioned the breakdown of society. Members should widen their vision and see what is happening. We are moving from a hierarchical social structure into a more modern democratic one, and this has been taking place over several generations.

People talk about the good old days, but I would like to remind people of the last recorded incident of a four-year-old child dying of cirrhosis of the liver on the streets of London. In 1904, 'The Times' reported that the death occurred as a result of the then common practice of slipping children a sip of gin to keep them quiet. Parental problems are as prevalent now as they were in the good old days. The hierarchical social structure was essentially based on the philosophy that humans were intrinsically evil and must be punished on account of that evil. However, we have moved on since then. We are moving towards a democratic social structure, and as we readily accept the logic and rationale for a democratic system, we must develop ways to make it work and provide new thinking, ideas, support and resources. The Assembly has made its wee mark in the debate concerning the appointment of a children's commissioner, which is about to take place. That is the kind of thinking, resources and support that we should offer to help families who are having difficulties with wayward children and in dealing with parental and responsibility issues. We must bear in mind that we are moving towards a new society.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Neill: The new society structure may not fully impact on our generation, but it will impact — that is certain. Things are moving in such a way that we will not be able to prevent that impact taking place.

Mrs I Robinson: This motion relates to every constituency in Northern Ireland, including my own area of Strangford. Violence, such as shootings, attempted murders, burglaries and assaults, happens almost weekly in Strangford, as is the case in other areas. The most recent attack, on a 92-year-old woman in Newtownards last night, illustrates the sick, depraved and barbaric mentality of some who are loose in society.

There has always been crime in Northern Ireland, but the crime rate in my constituency and across the Province is on the up. That has been more visible than ever in recent years. We all saw the terrible incidents in North Belfast of recent months, however criminal and paramilitary activity is not exclusive to that constituency — it is everywhere. What can we do to stop it?

Although I welcome the chance to raise the issue in the Assembly, the Alliance Party, which tabled the motion, is either extremely naive or immensely hypocritical to suggest that it is shocked and surprised by such a breakdown in law and order. For example, the police require more resources and manpower, yet Patten is reducing the number of police officers by 700 every year and is recruiting only 300 a year. One does not have to be a mathematician to see the shortcomings of that method. Although 25% to 35% of officers on duty at any given time are full-time reserve staff, the SDLP,

the Alliance Party and others want the removal of the full-time reserve, which comprises 3,000 officers. I call on those parties to support the retention of those experienced police officers.

I intend to stick rigidly to the motion, but it is important that we examine the causes of the rise in lawlessness in Northern Ireland. We need to ascertain what is fuelling the anarchy, and how, as elected representatives, we can help to stop it from destroying society. I condemn unreservedly those responsible for the recent terrible murders, shootings, bombings and punishment beatings here. Those who carry out such murderous and evil attacks are not interested in democracy or morality — nor will they ever be. Rather, they enjoy the power that they wield in their communities by terrorising local people.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to keep the link between what she is presenting and the motion.

Mrs I Robinson: I am trying to paint a picture, Madam Deputy Speaker, if you will bear with me. Other Members who contributed to the debate strayed considerably from the motion. My points are appropriate.

I must admit, much as it pains me, that the culprits are successful in their evil intentions. The sad reality is that people are frightened. They are afraid to inform the police about the activities of those anti-social scumbags. The parties that supported the Belfast Agreement, and those who voted for them, did so, in some cases, because they genuinely thought that it would achieve peace. Those of us who opposed the process from the beginning — and who have been proven to be accurate in our analysis — believed that the appeasement of terrorists and the pollution of democracy would end only in tears.

I do not claim that everything that goes wrong, or all that is bad in Northern Ireland, is as a result of the Belfast Agreement. However, much of what is wrong in society has been caused by the effect of the Belfast Agreement on our community. Who here today will deny that the release of terrorists from jail, the placing of their representatives in Government and the concession to all their demands is having a negative effect on our community? If violence and terror are rewarded, others will believe that that activity pays. Unfortunately, that is part of the problem.

We must not forget that the deteriorating numbers, morale and effectiveness of the police in Northern Ireland have contributed a good deal to our present position. My party opposed Patten and the planned destruction of the RUC, because those provisions were contained in the Belfast Agreement. Unfortunately, the executioner's axe was held over the RUC for some time, until finally it fell upon the force last year.

Morale among officers is understandably low today. Can anyone blame them for that? They stood against anarchy for 30 years, to be rewarded only with destruction. That is something that many of us would find hard to cope with. The recommendations of the Patten Report also severely damaged the effectiveness of the police service — reducing numbers and running down the Reserve, and Special Branch — and have played a part in undermining policing in Northern Ireland.

1.45 pm

The police are now seriously undermanned, resulting in the force's being overwhelmed by the rise in crime. There simply are not enough police officers to effectively deal with every crime that is happening on our streets. They are stretched to the limit, and we must address that now. How can we, as political representatives, help to stop this criminal and paramilitary activity? We must ensure that the police have the money, the manpower and the will to go after the criminals and the terrorists who plague our community. We must secure the necessary funds from Government to help to put law and order back on the streets and reclaim our cities, towns and villages from criminal elements.

We must stop the closure of our police stations, because that is having a negative effect on ordinary people who look to local stations for help when they experience a crisis on their doorstep. We must also put our own house in order. What kind of example are we setting, when people who still hold on to their weapons are represented in Government? We must show people that democracy is still paramount in Northern Ireland. Only those who are committed to democracy, who reject violence and terrorism and who have no private armies at their beck and call can be in the Government. The sooner we realise that mistakes have been made — and then start to rectify them — the sooner that some normality can be brought about.

I support the motion, but I point out the obvious faults that lie in the proposers' reasoning on it. The breakdown in law and order has happened for numerous reasons — rewarding terrorists, running down the effectiveness of the police force and a polluted political system have all contributed to the current situation. It is up to the people here to decide whether they will set things right or keep the status quo.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My party will not be supporting the motion, because it has more to do with trying to promote the credibility of the RUC — the PSNI — than addressing the serious problems of the breakdown in our value system. The motion lumps together several different problems, and then fails to make the connections with solutions. The solution is not to throw more finances at the RUC. The solution is to make the Good Friday Agreement work. The motion has more to do with the

politics of the Alliance Party than the serious problems that are contained in our society at the moment. If we, and everyone else, are sincere, then we should be about trying to address violent attacks, and we should be trying to understand how a society coming from conflict, and being swept along in the great social experiment called “modern living”, with its consumer values, is affecting us.

All the traditional value carriers in our society have gone underground. We have chucked the baby out with the bathwater. The influence that shapes our lives and the lives of our young people is greed, as dictated by market forces. In addition, we are part of a society in which the culture of sectarianism has been reinforced by law and order and paramilitary policing.

The attacks on postal workers, teachers and others in the public sector are sectarian in nature, and the motion does not address that. We must ask ourselves whether Unionist and Loyalist politicians are confident that they are doing enough in their own communities — where these attacks are coming from — or whether they are preoccupied with attempting to blame Republicans for everything that is wrong in our society.

The attacks on our ambulances, bus and train personnel and the fire brigade — who are inexplicably not included in the motion — as well as the elderly are a different matter. The drunkenness and the violence associated with those attacks are mere extensions of a wider catharsis in our society.

There is a sense that these people have become easy targets and that respect for these highly praised services and traditions has broken down.

The answer is not to pour money into a police force that does not have the confidence of our communities. We must examine issues such as the criminal justice system, how it responds and how it did so in the past, when law and order involved the abuse of power. The law was used to discriminate against Catholic Nationalists and to support paramilitary policing. Sinn Féin trusts that the criminal justice review, to which it has made a substantial submission, will recommend profound changes to the legal system to address criminality.

Sinn Féin does not support the police force as it is currently constituted. Our position is clear on the British Government's failure to implement the Good Friday Agreement and the Patten recommendations, which proposed the threshold for a new beginning and a police service based on a human rights ethos.

Special Branch hinders investigations of violent crime and inquiries into the deaths of almost 400 people who were murdered as a result of its collusion with paramilitary organisations. It uses criminals and hoods to further its political agenda, and that concerns us.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I advise the Member to stick to the subject of the motion.

Mrs Nelis: I am doing my best, a LeasCheann Comhairle, but other Members also strayed considerably.

Special Branch knows the identities of pipe bombers, the murderers of Danny McColgan and drug dealers and their agents in the UDA who are still in business. No matter how many resources the PSNI will have, it will not have the confidence of the communities that we represent to enable it to deliver effective community policing in partnership with the people.

Marginalised communities need resources to provide jobs, education, housing, a stronger community infrastructure, community and youth services, and support for the elderly and vulnerable young people — that is a separate matter.

Those whom we represent want policing; they need it for community safety. The tragedy is that we are the most politically policed society in Europe, at a huge cost. Last year's policing budget was £645 million, with an additional £102 million for the implementation of the Patten recommendations. The taxpayer funds that. This morning we were told that 87,000 crimes were committed last year. Our communities are patrolled by 11,000 members of the RUC, in addition to the Royal Irish Regiment — one in every four of the population. What percentage of that £645 million budget is spent on guarding retired police chiefs?

Members listed the terrible incidents that are reported daily by the media. We could all recall similar incidents. The destruction of the casualty department in Altnagelvin Hospital some weeks ago happened during a fight between the UDA and the UVF, which started in a nightclub seven miles away. The incident was recorded on CCTV. Was anyone arrested? In this instance, the silence of the PSNI is deafening, as is the silence of the Secretary of State in respect of the continued pipe bombings and arson attacks on Catholic homes. A Catholic trade unionist said on the radio this morning that his home was attacked 20 times.

It is deplorable that the Secretary of State could not attend the rally in protest against the death of Danny McColgan and in support of postal workers, the Fire Service, teachers and the Ambulance Service. It is equally reprehensible that Mr Paisley Jnr should blame everyone, except the DUP, for what has happened. That comes from the member of a party that was involved in gunrunning, which resulted in the deaths of over 400 people. It is sad reflection — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Shannon: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Mrs Nelis's comment that my party is involved in gunrunning is totally erroneous and false. My party has never been involved in gunrunning, has nothing to do with it and will not have anything to do with it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. Would the Member please clarify what she has said?

Mrs Nelis: The point was previously made in the House about the DUP's relationship with the agent, Brian Nelson, and its connection with the guns that were brought in from South Africa. I am not going to go into that.

The motion is a lost opportunity to really address the issues of a community emerging from conflict, the problems around this and the resources needed to tackle it.

Mr Attwood: I will comment on some of the points I have heard so far, and, in that way I will address the substance of the motion.

Mary Nelis, in a somewhat more measured way than usual, outlined how there had been a breakdown in the value system in the North. She said that that breakdown was a product of greed and market forces, and I agree. She said that it was a creation of the culture of sectarianism within law and order and paramilitary policing. I might have some basis for agreeing with her. But never once in her contribution did she outline that if there has been a breakdown in our value systems, it has also been in the creation of paramilitary organisations, their practices and abuses over many years in Northern Ireland society.

When Mary Nelis says that the DUP blames everyone but the DUP for the problems of law and order in Northern Ireland then I say to her that Sinn Féin seems to blame everyone but Republicans for the breakdown — if there is such a breakdown — in law and order in Northern Ireland.

If people from either side of the Chamber approach law and order in a partial and selective basis, then they ill-serve the debate. They must face up to the acceptance that paramilitary organisations involved in crime today are a creation of that which went before, namely the paramilitary organisations that were involved in the use of violence in Northern Ireland to bring about threat and terror in our society. People must face up to the responsibility for that if they want to address the core of the motion.

Iris Robinson — and she is not in the Chamber — asked the SDLP to justify the running-down and ending of the full-time reserve at a time when a call might be made for additional resources for policing. That is a fair question. The answer is simple: the core function and objective of policing in our society, like every other one, is community policing. To bring that about in the lives of the citizens and the communities of the North, an accountable, unarmed, civilianised police service conforming to human rights standards is required.

That is what the Patten Report offered, and to bring it about, the full-time reserve should be no more.

The ending of the full-time reserve, while it may create a shortage of police officers, will bring about greater support for the Police Service. Whatever the perceived loss might be, the lives of the citizens of the North will gain in community policing. That is why we want to see the full-time reserve run down, as the Patten Report and the implementation plan intend. At the same time, there should be an increase in the part-time reserve beyond current figures. Each community in the North, particularly where there are few or no members of the part-time reserve at present, will, in future, have members in every street, hamlet, village and town throughout Northern Ireland.

Under Patten and the implementation plan, that will see 2,500 — *[Interruption]*.

2.00 pm

Mr J Kelly: The Member has mentioned the Patten Report on several occasions. Does he not agree that the problem lies with the failure to implement that report in full?

Mr Attwood: If that is the problem, why does the Irish Government not say so? Why does Irish America not say so? Why do the Irish Churches not say so? Why does the United States Government not say so? If that is the case, why do all those voices agree with the SDLP, with the Taoiseach and with many other spokespersons on the national life of this island, to say that the spirit and substance of Patten is now available? That is your answer. The premise of your question is wrong. Those who speak in so many ways for that which represents national life agree with the SDLP.

I concur with Duncan Shipley Dalton and other Members who look beyond the issue of current staffing levels in the Police Service. As they have outlined, the resourcing of the service is more complex than the number of officers. At present, the sickness absence rate in the Police Service is unnecessarily high. There is a disproportion between those in desk jobs and those serving on the ground. Consequently, better management of resources at hand can bring about better response times and a greater presence of police officers on the ground.

If we are to ask the Secretary of State to make more resources available, we should argue for the release of additional funds for more overtime; for anti-racketeering initiatives by the police and other agencies; and to target the godfathers of paramilitary organisations who are directing acts of violence, threat and terror in our society. These legitimate steps are required immediately to tackle the issue of law and order in the North. We ask the British Government to attend to that.

There have been many difficulties in recent days. There have been attacks on private citizens and public

servants. Those attacks must be addressed immediately. If I have an issue with the motion, it is the assertion that there has been a breakdown of law and order in Northern Ireland. I accept that there are strains and pressures on law and order, but I do not necessarily agree that there has been a breakdown. Both before and since the 30 years of violence, the crime figures prove that the crime rate in Northern Ireland is lower than that in any other region of this island or in Britain.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member must draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Attwood: That is a reflection of the strong community and family values of our society.

Mr Shannon: I am glad that this motion has come before us for discussion today. Many of us are concerned about what is happening to the police force in the Province. My party has said time and time again that the Patten Report is causing the destruction of this country. How right we are. The police have been cut back to an impossible level, and crime figures are soaring. The pro-agreement parties tell us that this is the way forward to peace, and that the police force had to be modified to fit the new and progressive country that the peace process was creating.

The word “anarchy” is what the “Yes” parties had in mind when they supported the Patten Report. Can they explain that to the 84-year-old woman who was beaten up and robbed in her home at the weekend in my constituency of Strangford? That happened because only two police officers cover the Ards Peninsula, which is such a vast area. So much for the bright new society that we were told a new improved police force would give us. How can it be delivered with fewer officers? I cannot comprehend the logic of the Member who said that the reserve police force must be run down and done away with. Do away with officers, increase crime and violence levels and that is acceptable — I do not think so. I am interested to know whether the Member would support this notional motion.

There have been some police station closures, and every day people in my constituency say that the police took over two hours to get to their houses or that they did not come at all. That is not because they do not want to come — they want to get out to do the job, but they do not have the resources, the manpower or the finances. Last week a group of men attacked a farmer on his farm outside Killyleagh at 9.45 am, in broad daylight. The incident has been treated as attempted murder, but it was a robbery. I have warned about such an incident for months. The police have received reports from rural residents in Strangford and other parts of the Province of men driving slowly past farms and houses. Some people's sheds and vans have been broken into, but the police have not been turning up because of insufficient resources.

I asked the chief inspector in my area what was happening as people were in fear for their property and their physical well-being. I was told that many police officers had been offered packages as a result of the Patten Report and that many had taken them, which left the number of officers on the ground depleted. There are insufficient resources to deal with crimes, and the manpower is not there to help.

The next initiative that the police have been forced to adopt — and I underline “forced to adopt” — to deal with some of the crime committed is the four-tiered response categorisation. I am not sure whether Members are aware of it yet, but the new system will include a response time call schedule. In other words, a police officer will have to allocate a time to respond to a call. This may be at the convenience of the victim, or it may take longer if the police are overstretched. Again we see where problems arise for the police force.

The delay in collecting forensic evidence worries me. Forensic evidence is there for a period, but if a police officer cannot come out to investigate an incident due to insufficient resources, the forensic evidence could disappear. That, along with other things that must be implemented, is more political red tape that officers must deal with before they can get on with the job in hand.

I am fed up with the constant demands that have been heaped upon the police which mean that they are getting weighed down by political red tape. The police want to get on with protecting people, preventing crime and catching those who commit crimes. That is their job, and that is what they want to do. It is time that the Secretary of State gave the police the resources to deal with crime effectively, not just in the rural constituency of Strangford, but in other constituencies which are now targets for out-of-town criminals. They are aware that the police will be at least 20 to 30 minutes away at any one time, and it is the same in other parts of the Province.

Ambulance drivers are under attack from youths and mobs throwing stones and worse, and we have recently seen incidences of that. If there were adequate resources, the police could deal with offenders as quickly as it takes them to gather the rocks to throw. Last week there was a fracas and a free-for-all in the accident and emergency department of Altnagelvin Hospital. Postal workers' and teachers' lives were put under threat a few weeks ago, and there were insufficient officers for the saturation patrols that were needed to protect those who were threatened, due to the Patten Report.

Those who are moaning about the breakdown of law and order — and we have all made comments about it — must look to those in the “Yes” camp. They and they alone instigated the Patten Report and told us all how wonderful it was all going to be. They and they alone gave carte blanche to the yobs and gangsters who are holding us all to ransom. They took away the

only defence we had against those people — the Royal Ulster Constabulary. By the way, their new and super-politically correct Police Service will not be on the streets until the end of June, so it will be five months before there are any new officers to relieve the problems that Patten gave us.

Some Members referred to sickness among police officers. That is because they are overstretched. They work long hours, they are under stress, and the problems that they face take a heavy toll on those who served in the RUC and now serve in the Police Service of Northern Ireland. There are also those who are direct casualties of incidents that take place. That is what is happening. Some police officers are off on long-term and short-term sick leave due to the conditions and the rundown in the service. They do not have the resources — the manpower or the finance — to do their jobs.

They are also not allowed to get experience or tips from any former members of the RUC. They are not allowed to learn by example, as they have been told that that example no longer applies. Why should they not be allowed to gain from the experience and expertise of those who served in the RUC? Can we, therefore, assume that half of our police force from June 2002 will not have the same experience, because Patten said that we must have an all bright and sparkling new police force that has no ties with the RUC? I cannot comprehend that. Where we have police with ability, experience and the wherewithal to deliver a service, let them be of use. Let them pass on their information and experience to those who come after.

I call on the Secretary of State to pour resources into members of our Police Service, who are trying their best with little support — least of all from the Secretary of State. I urge Members who are in the “Yes” agreement camp to stand up and say, “Yes, we want more resources”. However, the reason that they do not have the resources they need is the Patten Commission and the Patten Report.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I shall call one more Member. However, to allow enough time to wind up before Question Time, I urge the Member to stay within eight minutes.

Mr C Wilson: My party Colleagues and I fully support the sentiments in the opening paragraph of the motion, where it refers to attacks on postal workers, ambulance staff, the Fire Service, bus and train personnel and elderly members of our community. It is increasingly worrying for elderly people, even those who are in fold and care situations, who are having difficulty with people attempting to come into what should be a secure area.

However, with regard to the remedy that the Alliance Party Members are seeking, once again my party will not be party to a sham. We have heard from Member after Member of the direct link between the surge in

crime on our streets and the general lawlessness here and the glaring fact that “organised crime” permeates through every aspect of crime in the Province.

Very few of the crimes that have occurred, despite the comments of Mr Dalton and others, do not have their origins in the paramilitaries' vice-like grip on the community. That is the case, and other Members have said that the RUC could pride itself on a record that was second to none in Europe, given its success rate with ordinary criminal activity. This success rate was an example to other police forces who sent their officers for training here. It also had to deal with the serious terrorist threat, and when the terrorist threat was at its peak, the RUC managed to deal with both types of crime.

I find it difficult to accept how genuine the mover of the motion and her party are in their call for a crackdown on crime. All the parties who signed up to the Belfast Agreement endorsed the Patten recommendations that were sewn into the agreement — including, to his shame, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. They have not only brought this into the democratic process, but they have inhibited the ability of those who were charged with enforcing law and order in Northern Ireland.

They have diminished the possibility of the forces of law and order being able to deal with the godfathers of violence. As mentioned by other Members, those godfathers are in control of certain areas, where, as a law enforcement officer told me, it will soon be impossible to get a handle on the present state of affairs. The Province is in a grave position. The problem for the Alliance Party and the others is clear. When the Belfast Agreement was being negotiated, we had a Secretary of State, Dr Mowlam, who went into the prisons. She came out and told the people of Northern Ireland that she had met two heroes of the peace process — “Johnny and Michael”. She informed the press that they were Johnny Adair and Michael Stone. The press were amazed at such a declaration. The sad thing is that all of the parties who signed the agreement sat dumb and nodded like the courtiers in the story of the ‘Emperor’s New Clothes.’ Those parties bought in the idea that people could run a paramilitary organisation and still be part of the wonderful new future for Northern Ireland.

2.15 pm

They want peace on the cheap, but if crime in our society is to be dealt with, we need to start at the fountainhead. Let us get the godfathers — the people who are polluting the community — in both the Republican movement and the so-called Loyalist paramilitary organisations. I say to Mrs Bell — through you, Madam Deputy Speaker — that until that nettle has been grasped, it is no good talking about dealing harshly with young people in our community, as Mr Ervine advocated, and as the paramilitary groups do every night.

If, while Mrs Bell asks for that and calls for extra resources to be put into policing in Northern Ireland, there is a Government that refuse to deal with terror; that put gunmen into positions in Government; and that release unreconstructed and unrepentant prisoners wholesale onto our streets, then this breakdown is what we get.

Mrs E Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr C Wilson: That is all going according to plan. The plan is the Belfast Agreement. Mr Duncan Shipley Dalton and others, who were party to the agreement — *[Interruption]*.

Mrs E Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr C Wilson: — may wish to hold up their hands and say “It is nothing to do with the agreement; we had violence before we had the agreement”. That is true. The difference, however, is that the decent ordinary citizens, who wanted nothing to do with the paramilitaries and the godfathers of violence, now find those people sitting in the House.

In an effort to fool the electorate, Mr Trimble has come up with a novel idea.

Mrs E Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr C Wilson: Sorry, Mr Speaker, I am speaking about law and order.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member has been asked whether he will give way.

Mr C Wilson: No, I will not give way.

Mr Trimble’s latest attempt to fool the electorate and the Unionist people is to appoint a spymaster general — *[Interruption]*.

Mrs E Bell: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was told by the Speaker that I should speak to the motion. I do not think that the Member is speaking to the motion.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I was about to draw Mr Wilson’s attention to the fact that he must speak to the motion, as other Members have been advised.

Mr C Wilson: I was discussing law and order, which is an issue that needs to be discussed in the Province. Mr Trimble tells us that he is going to have a spymaster general to keep an eye on the Sinn Féin Members at Westminster. If Mr Trimble wants to know the pedigree of the Member of Parliament Mr McGuinness, he has only to read ‘From Guns to Government’.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr C Wilson: If he wants to know what Mr Gerry Adams was doing — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have reminded the Member to speak to the motion, which is about resources. I ask him to do so.

Mr C Wilson: I certainly will, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am calling — and I cannot see how it is in any way departing from the motion — for the House to recognise that it needs to be genuine in its calls for law enforcement and for the orchestrators of violence to be brought to justice. Some have suggested the establishment of another Committee to investigate violence. I heard Ms McWilliams calling for that.

In my hand I have a glossy document published by the Northern Ireland Organised Crime Taskforce. It cost several thousand pounds to produce, and it has a foreword written by the then Minister, Adam Ingram, telling us that now that the agreement was in place, it was time to get tough on organised crime and terror.

That report was published in September 2000. Where is the evidence that anything has been done about organised crime? This House must get real and recognise that in order to decommission the terrorists and criminals, it must start by removing them from the Government of Northern Ireland. Let us give credit to the men and women of the police who stood between the criminals and the ordinary, decent, law-abiding citizens.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member should draw his remarks to a close.

Mr C Wilson: It is a disgrace, and we will not be party to it.

Mr McCarthy: This debate has come at an appropriate time, and I thank my Assembly Colleagues for agreeing to discuss this matter.

The lack of resources is of paramount importance. There is no doubt that there is real concern about the escalation of all types of crime in Northern Ireland. We acknowledge that policing in Northern Ireland is going through a radical change. Nevertheless, ordinary people simply wish to be protected. They have a right to expect the state to provide sufficient and efficient policing. I am greatly concerned about the Report of the Chief Constable 2000-01. Among other things, it says:

“Should appropriate additional funding not be made available, I have no doubt the required cuts would severely impact on our ability to maintain basic services over the three-year period. The Northern Ireland Office has been made aware of the consequences of these cuts”.

It is my understanding that the Police Service has a budget shortfall of approximately £15 million this year. Unless it receives a drastic increase in resources soon, that figure will be magnified to outrageous proportions. In turn, that will leave our community with a poorly financed Police Service.

I make an appeal to the Northern Ireland Office, John Reid, Des Browne and Jane Kennedy to ensure

that our community does not suffer unnecessarily. We do not want to see law and order going down the same road as the Health Service. Everyone is aware of what is going on in relation to law and order, and every area is affected. Almost every morning newspapers and news bulletins report incidents of sectarian attacks on the public services, schools, ambulances and the Fire Service. People even go into hospitals to commit acts of lawlessness. There are robberies and burglaries; senior citizens are being attacked and terrified in their own homes. I have not even mentioned the bigger issues of drugs, beatings and intimidation.

The community must come to its senses. We need more visible signs that policemen and policewomen are out on the beat. In this age of instant communications, extra personnel should be available almost immediately. We also need the co-operation of the whole community. The police cannot do the job on their own. People should be alert and look after their neighbours, or their neighbours' property. If anything suspicious happens, they should alert the police. In this way, they can prevent crime.

Sometimes it appears that the increase in crime might have been expected. The paramilitary activists, who are supposed to be on ceasefire, feel that they must turn to criminal activity. There can be no excuse for that. Society must not tolerate any excuse for the lawbreaking that it is experiencing.

It would appear that, because of the lack of police personnel on the ground across Northern Ireland, criminal activity has escalated significantly. In my area, and right across Northern Ireland, there are a limited number of police officers on duty to cover huge areas. It is unacceptable that decent people must endure that. The criminals are well aware of the situation. They commit their dastardly deeds knowing that they might never be apprehended.

People elected us to the Assembly so that we would make their lives better. At the moment many people, particularly the elderly, live alone and in fear. Given that the Assembly does not have the necessary powers, it is its duty to ensure that Dr Reid, the Northern Ireland Office and the Chief Constable take what action is necessary to get the issue of law and order under control as soon as possible. Last week Dr Reid publicly asked the whole community to support the Police Service. The Alliance Party agrees with that and asks Dr Reid to ensure that sufficient funding is available for the Police Service.

I thank those Members who spoke in support of the motion. I am disappointed by the attitude of Sinn Féin. That party blames everybody but itself. It is wrong that it should play politics with law and order. Must every issue satisfy Sinn Féin before it will support the Police Service? My party apologises to Members if

some services have been excluded from the motion. Mr Ervine mentioned that the Fire Service had been left out. The Alliance Party wishes to include everyone who provides a service to the community.

The Belfast Agreement and the Patten Report cannot be entirely to blame for the breakdown of law and order, as some Members have suggested. The Alliance Party is neither naive nor hypocritical. I am glad to see that Mr Boyd has admitted the error of his ways by leaving the Chamber.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

No one has mentioned the enormous resources that have been used at Drumcree and in north Belfast. I hope that those two major obstacles can be cleared soon and that the immense resources that have been ploughed into those and other such incidents will go into the financing of real policing in Northern Ireland. I ask Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly condemns the breakdown of law and order in Northern Ireland society, including attacks on postal workers, ambulance staff, bus and train personnel and elderly members of the community, and calls on the Secretary of State to allocate sufficient, specific resources to enable the PSNI and other organisations to improve the situation at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Speaker: There are one and a half minutes until Question Time, and rather than suspend the House, I suggest the House takes its leisure until 2.30 pm.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the House that question 1, in the name of Mr Roger Hutchinson; question 2, in the name of Mr Gerry McHugh; question 7, in the name of Mr Eddie McGrady; question 16, in the name of Mr Barry McElduff; question 18, in the name of Mr Mark Robinson; and question 19, in the name of Mr Joe Byrne have been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

Industrial Development Board (IDB) Trips

3. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number and cost of trips by IDB officials to the United States in the past year; and to make a statement. (AQO 680/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): Since January 2001, IDB officials have made 34 visits to the United States, at a total cost of £123,461, which included flights, accommodation and subsistence costs. Such visits are necessary to meet with potential investors, key influencers and parent companies of existing IDB client companies and to participate and trade in export events, such as trade missions and international exhibitions.

Mr Dallat: I wish the Minister well with his endeavours to attract new inward investment to Northern Ireland. How are those trips measured for cost-effectiveness? How many new jobs are likely to materialise as a direct result of those trips?

Sir Reg Empey: There is a variety of reasons for those visits. For instance, some firms make trade visits to international exhibitions. That happens on a regular programme that is announced in advance each year. When companies go out, they are invariably led or accompanied by IDB officials.

One measurement of cost-effectiveness is the success of each company in attracting new business. That varies, but the fact that the participation of companies is consistent — in many cases the same people come back time and again — proves that the companies feel that they are making progress.

Other visits involve calling with companies to move forward on letters of offer, or for negotiations. In the current financial year, an incubator unit was opened in Boston, which necessitated several visits to make the

legal arrangements and so on. There are many reasons for visiting. The circumstances surrounding the events of 11 September made it necessary to visit several key investors to see if we could act to prevent further redundancies or to open up further investment opportunities.

The Member is right to draw attention to the issue, which is constantly reviewed. There are a variety of mechanisms that must be used to monitor it. However, it remains the responsibility of the IDB to ensure that, when it sends officials out at public expense, there is proper rationale and appropriate monitoring of actual visitations.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister believe that the expenditure is an effective use of taxpayers' money? Does he agree with the current advertisement from British Airways that it is, on occasion, very important to do business in person, and that faxes and reports may not be enough to secure investment to Northern Ireland?

Sir Reg Empey: Such visits are effective tools. About six or seven years ago, Belfast City Council began serious economic development activities by deciding to visit New York and Boston. That was met with outrage, because the council was going to spend around £300 or £400 on air fares. Several major investments, such as Liberty Mutual and others, came about as a result of those visits. It is a question of balance and common sense.

The Member is correct that modern communications such as e-mail save a lot of travel and other costs. However, when you are persuading people to invest, in many cases there is no substitute for approaching them in person. Any company that is investing large amounts of money wants to know with whom they are dealing and to be satisfied and persuaded. The costs that have been incurred with such trips are not excessive when compared to the size of the budget for which the IDB is responsible.

Saintfield Yarns Ltd

4. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he has met elected representatives to discuss the problems being experienced by Saintfield Yarns Ltd. (AQO 656/01)

9. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any action taken to protect jobs at Saintfield Yarns Ltd; and to make a statement. (AQO 676/01)

Sir Reg Empey: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 9 together. My officials in the IDB have worked closely, and continue to work

closely, with the management of Saintfield Yarns. An agreement to provide a financial assistance package aimed at securing the company's future and at safeguarding jobs was agreed in principle on 9 January 2002. I had one informal meeting with Lord Kilclooney MLA specifically on the subject of Saintfield Yarns.

Mrs I Robinson: I welcome the successful resolution of the temporary difficulties faced by Saintfield Yarns, and the company's retaining a place in the global textile industry.

However, can the Minister confirm that I was the first elected representative to contact his office on Wednesday 19 December 2002 and Friday 21 December 2001 to arrange an urgent meeting to discuss the problems faced by Saintfield Yarns? I was promised the first available meeting with him after his Christmas vacation, which ended on Monday 7 January 2002.

Can the Minister provide an explanation for his meeting with an elected Member of his own party who became involved with the matter only after my involvement was reported in the local press?

Is it not, therefore, a flagrant abuse of his office and a major breach of his commitment to meet with me that the Minister went behind backs to meet with a party Colleague?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member is right to say that the important thing is that the company has been helped. I am pleased to relay a response from the managing director of Saintfield Yarns that he is pleased with the result of the negotiations, and that we had helped the firm over quite a hump.

The Member is correct: she approached my office and was the first representative to do so. I arranged a meeting to be held after the recess; however, after I left for the Christmas recess, Lord Kilclooney contacted my office. Subsequently, my party leader called a meeting of Assembly Members after Christmas. That meeting had not been advertised in the public domain, and we did not know about it before the holiday. At that party meeting Lord Kilclooney approached me personally and gave me a letter. That was the informal meeting reported in my initial answer.

If the hon Lady is saying that I should have refused to speak to Lord Kilclooney or to accept his letter in regard to the matter, that is clearly nonsense. In a press statement issued by the hon Member she made several serious allegations, attacking the IDB, my Department and me. My officials had nothing whatsoever to do with arranging any meeting with Lord Kilclooney. No officials from my Department were present. The allegations made in the hon Member's statement were untrue, and I hope that she will withdraw them.

The important thing is that, so far, we have managed to secure those jobs. It is irrelevant to me whose name appears first in the press.

Mr Hamilton: The Minister will not have failed to see the criticism levelled at the IDB by Iris Robinson, MLA for Strangford, for achieving such a positive outcome for Saintfield Yarns. Can the Minister explain that condemnation when, through sterling efforts, the IDB safeguarded jobs in the company and in Strangford?

Sir Reg Empey: I do not understand, and neither do my officials understand, the nature of those attacks. I have attacked the IDB in the past when I felt that it had been inappropriate in its actions.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. It is not appropriate for the Minister to give way to a Member during Question Time.

Sir Reg Empey: In this case the IDB was exemplary. I have followed this issue closely and have had two face-to-face meetings with the acting chief executive. I have received several written briefings and phone calls. I am satisfied that the IDB has acted appropriately, and the company has put in black and white that it is satisfied.

What happened was simple. The Member for Strangford contacted me to arrange a meeting, which was fine. The meeting was arranged. Subsequently, by sheer coincidence, a party meeting was called, and at that meeting another MLA from the same constituency approached me. It is as simple as that. Officials were not involved, and so what? The important thing is that we managed to secure the jobs. We must remain focussed on that — not on other forms of codology.

Mrs I Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is aware that I do not take points of order during Question Time. If the Member wishes to raise a question of order at the end, she is at liberty to do so.

Unemployment Figures

5. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give a breakdown of the unemployment figures by gender in the South Down area in each of the last four years. (AQO 701/01)

Sir Reg Empey: I placed a copy of the requested information in the Assembly Library. The nature of it renders it too complicated to read out.

Mr M Murphy: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he give details of which wards are experiencing the highest level of unemployment in South Down?

Sir Reg Empey: The Department keeps copies of the information that is available at district council level. I suspect that it is not possible to give the Member information at ward level. The Department can provide the Member with the information at district council level, and I would be happy to place that in the Library for his perusal. Anecdotal information may be available at local level, but official figures are not kept.

Mr O'Neill: What are the Department and the IDB doing about the number of unemployment black spots in South Down? I refer, in particular, to the withdrawn question of my Colleague, and the concern that we have about progress on the Down Business Park, Downpatrick.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member has referred to question 7 in the name of Mr McGrady. A Written Answer will be given and will be available in the Library. The IDB has arranged a significant number of visits to the Down Business Park. That development is constantly kept to the fore, because it received significant investment. A fully-serviced site is available, negotiations are ongoing with a developer, and, in the last 12 months, the IDB has sponsored five company visits to the site.

It is not the only area in South Down that requires assistance, and I have received representations from Ballynahinch and other towns. The Member will recall that, a couple of months ago, I attended a meeting with Down District Council, and we discussed a range of problems in the area. Therefore, the Department is acutely aware of the pockets of deprivation there. We are also acutely aware that some companies have recently experienced difficulties, and I will write to Mr McGrady about that.

Departmental Public Bodies: Chairpersons' Terms of Office

6. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the terms of office; and (b) the conditions that apply for reappointment in respect of chairpersons appointed to serve on his departmental public bodies. (AQO 681/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The normal term of office for the chairpersons of the public bodies for which I am responsible is three years. Reappointments are made in accordance with guidance given by the Office of Public Appointments for Northern Ireland.

Mr Gallagher: When a chairperson who is being reappointed has business links with a company carrying out substantial work for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, is there a review of the way in which the contracts have operated prior to the reappointment? In view of the great public disquiet about the issue, will the Minister tell the House why — if there is no such review — that is the case?

2.45 pm

Sir Reg Empey: The Member is asking me an indirect question on a matter that is obviously to the forefront of his mind. I will answer in the broadest possible terms. The performance of any member of a public body, including the chairman, is appraised regularly when he or she becomes eligible for reappointment. The allotted time for chairpersonship of a public body is three years. A chairperson might be invited to serve a further term; usually that person will leave after that. Occasionally, there is a limit on how long someone may serve on a body, which may preclude a second term as chairperson. However, the chairperson, and every member, is appraised according to performance, attendance and other factors.

With regard to the Member's general point, I refer him to the remarks made to me here on 14 January by his hon Colleague Dr McDonnell who said that we must ensure that we do not exclude ourselves from access to a good deal of expertise in the business community. For example, it would be difficult to construct public bodies if we were to prevent business representatives from becoming members in case their businesses should have dealings with those bodies. In the case that the Member refers to, the individual concerned was carrying out the work in question before he was offered a public appointment. Furthermore, he was involved in more business activity then than he is now. People must be careful, but an assessment is carried out of an individual's performance and of all other circumstances that are pertinent to a public appointment.

Invest Northern Ireland

8. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether there is a transition "cushion" for Invest Northern Ireland (INI) or will it be expected to produce results immediately on its creation.

(AQO 700/01)

Sir Reg Empey: I assure Members that there will be no transitional "cushion" for Invest Northern Ireland when it becomes operational on 1 April 2002. Much time and effort has been devoted to ensuring that Invest Northern Ireland hits the ground running and that no time is lost in building on the success of existing agencies.

Mr Savage: What progress has been made on the establishment of Invest Northern Ireland?

Sir Reg Empey: The House passed the Final Stage of the Industrial Development Bill a fortnight ago, and the Bill will now be given Royal Assent. The legislative framework is nearly in place. I intend that Invest Northern Ireland should take effect from 1 April 2002. Much work has been done, and it has been a mammoth task. However, along with the team that has been put together, I intend to complete the make-up of the body's

board by the end of March. As Members know, I have appealed for further applications for membership of that board, and applications from women are particularly welcome. The closing date for applications is 31 January. The process of assessment will continue, and the new applications will be considered alongside those that have already been lodged.

A good deal of work has already been done, and I record my appreciation of the restructuring branch of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and of the co-operation of the boards of the existing agencies and the trade unions who have been working with us throughout the process. I hope that it will be possible to have a fully effective and operational body by 1 April 2002.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the new investment body be in a better position to help small businesses? In the past, the IDB was less able to do so because of the size of businesses, especially in rural areas.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member can be assured that small businesses are the backbone of Northern Ireland's business economy. Without the growth that those companies provide, it would not be possible to sustain a significant economy. The Member will know that, as the profile of small businesses is higher in his constituency than in other counties. As part of the corporate plan that will be prepared for the new body and which must be agreed by my Department in conjunction with the board of Invest Northern Ireland, we will ensure that the welfare of small businesses is at the top of the list. The birth rate of our small businesses is lower than the United Kingdom average — although the survival rate after three years is higher than in any other region of the UK — and we have a long way to go to catch up on the creation of those new companies. However, I intend to ensure that the interests of small businesses are effectively reflected in the corporate plan of the new organisation.

Industrial Research and Technology Unit (Examination of Telecoms Infrastructure)

10. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made by the Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU) since undertaking an examination of Northern Ireland's competitiveness as a knowledge-based economy on our telecoms infrastructure.

(AQO 665/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department has been developing a range of measures to raise awareness of the benefits of broadband services to business, and to stimulate demand for, and facilitate access to, those services — particularly in rural areas. The measures include a programme of support for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

that will facilitate access to broadband via satellite, which I announced on 15 January.

Mr McClarty: What specific actions is the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment taking to stimulate competitiveness in the telecoms market?

Sir Reg Empey: The Industrial Research and Technology Unit's e-solution centre demonstrates the various broadband technologies to businesses, and also provides impartial advice and guidance on the costs and quality of services associated with those technologies. An outreach marketing strategy is being developed, and it will be launched in February to take expertise to rural areas and to stimulate demand for broadband services. I receive a continual flow of written questions on this, as many Members, particularly those in rural areas, are concerned that their constituents will be disadvantaged through lack of access to physical, hardwired broadband services. We are looking at alternatives such as wireless and satellite, and I believe that the technology needed to provide those services exists. Indeed, we will stimulate companies to undertake that through a programme to encourage small- and medium-sized enterprises to take up satellite services. Support is available, in the form of up to 50% of set-up costs for first-year running costs, to a maximum of £1,500. That brings the cost of satellite broadband to a level comparable with the current costs of the hardwired asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL), as charges are currently higher for satellite than for ADSL. Northern Ireland is the first region of the UK to implement that kind of initiative, and it will have the opportunity to stimulate demand for the use of satellite services and create a level playing field, particularly for people in rural areas.

Mackies International Site

11. **Mr B Hutchinson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has for the Mackies International site situated on the Springfield Road, Belfast; and to make a statement. (AQO 664/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The vision for the former Mackies complex is that of a high-quality business park, which can be easily accessed by all sections of the community, and which provides much-needed jobs for local people. That will be realised through the retention and remodelling of some of the existing buildings and the provision of new purpose-built facilities to attract an appropriate mix of industrial and knowledge-based projects to the park.

Mr B Hutchinson: Will the Minister's plans for access to the Mackie's site via the Springfield road have any impact on people in the Greater Shankill area?

Sir Reg Empey: When my Department bought the complex from the receiver of Mackies in February 2001, I was particularly enthusiastic about the project because it facilitates access to the site for all sections

of the community. Access can be gained via Workman Avenue and the Springfield Road, and that should ensure that people from the Greater Shankill area have access without any fear of intimidation, and that likewise, people from other parts of West Belfast will have access via the Springfield Road.

This was one of the unique features of the site and one of the reasons why I am optimistic that it is going to be possible to develop that site to the benefit of everybody who lives in the greater Shankill area, as well as the greater west Belfast area.

Mrs Nelis: When international bodies close down their operations, and bearing in mind the considerable local investment in those operations, does the Minister have any influence on the future use of such sites?

Sir Reg Empey: That depends on who owns the site at the time of closure. In this case, the company owned the site, and the IDB subsequently acquired the site on behalf of the state. Sometimes a company could be operating on an IDB site or occupying an IDB factory, although there are fewer of those around now than there used to be — most have been sold off. It really depends on the circumstances at the time. It may well be that it is a matter entirely for the private sector, and it is sold on the open market. It depends on whether the IDB is entitled to receive any money back on behalf of the taxpayer through clawback — for example, the plant, land, or factory building might be security for loans from the IDB. However, this must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes we have influence, sometimes we have control, and sometimes we have none — it depends entirely on the case. If the Member has a particular one in mind, she can certainly bring it to my attention.

United Distillers and Vintners

12. **Mr J Wilson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any negotiations officials have had with United Distillers and Vintners (UDV) to locate a facility in Mallusk. (AQO 675/01)

Sir Reg Empey: I welcome the company's statement on 15 January of its intention to build a plant on a greenfield site in Belfast, and the IDB is in discussions with the company about the project. However, these discussions are still confidential, and it would be inappropriate to comment further at this stage.

Mr J Wilson: I accept that the negotiations are confidential. I am hopeful that the greenfield site, which has been spoken about publicly, may be in my constituency. If that turns out to be the case, does the Minister agree that there should be further negotiations with the firm concerned aimed at ensuring that Northern Ireland suppliers will be afforded the opportunity to provide the raw materials required by this firm?

Sir Reg Empey: I know that the Member has asked the question from an altruistic point of view, with the whole of Northern Ireland in mind, and that the benefits to the whole of Northern Ireland are his primary concern. I cannot go into the detail, as I indicated earlier, but the question of local suppliers was one of the factors that influenced the negotiations. I would be optimistic that local companies could provide a significant amount of raw material to the investor. This is an extremely prestigious investment, which was won against stiff competition. It has the potential to create 93 high-quality jobs somewhere in Northern Ireland, and I am sure the hon Member will wish it well wherever it goes.

Loughlink Ferry Service

13. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment he has made in relation to the failure to introduce the proposed loughlink ferry service for Belfast Lough. (AQO 670/01)

Sir Reg Empey: A number of factors contributed to the failure of this project, ranging from a delay in the delivery of the vessels to the failure to secure an operating licence. Despite investigation by my Department, it is regrettable that the project was unable to secure the additional funding required to take the project forward. It is also regrettable that what would have been a new business proposal for Northern Ireland will not proceed owing to the commercial difficulties experienced by the promoters of the project.

3.00 pm

Mr Hilditch: Will the Minister indicate the cost to the taxpayer of grant payments or resources made available to the Loughlink Ferry Service, during what was supposed to be the start-up period?

Sir Reg Empey: Resources were offered to the company to assist in obtaining consultancy services. The company was offered the maximum amount available under the home start programme — because that was deemed to be a local service — but did not claim any grant money.

Power Station and Gas Project

14. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the power station and gas project to the north-west. (AQO 696/01)

Sir Reg Empey: OFREG has published proposals to grant a gas conveyance licence to Bord Gáis, and the closing date for representations and objections was 25 January 2002. The power station project is on schedule to achieve its completion date.

Mrs Courtney: Can we be updated regularly on the matter, because it is critical to economic development in the north-west?

Sir Reg Empey: I assure the Member that it is inconceivable that after all of her questions and those of her Colleagues, and after the interest that they have shown in the matter, it will pass by default.

Technology Opportunities

15. **Mr McMennamin** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 581/01, to detail the progress achieved in identifying appropriate and affordable technology opportunities, in particular broadband services, west of the Bann. (AQO 707/01)

Sir Reg Empey: I recently announced a programme of support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which enables rural, non-asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL) areas gain access to broadband services. That included areas west of the Bann. My Department has also secured £1.5 million from the Department of Trade and Industry in London for a range of innovative schemes and pilot actions with the aim of extending broadband networks to a wider range of customers than those who appear commercially viable.

Mr McMennamin: I represent the rural constituency of West Tyrone. It is very important to that area and especially to my home town of Strabane that the proper IT infrastructure is in place to enable us to attract inward investment.

Mr Speaker: The Minister will have to respond to the Member's supplementary question in writing, since the time for questions is up.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Mr Speaker: Question 8, in the name of Mr Hilditch, has been transferred to the Minister of Education and will receive a written answer.

Mr Hilditch: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I do not normally take points of order during questions to the Minister. I am somewhat at a loss to know what possible point of order there could be on such a question, since the question of transfers is a matter for the Executive. The Member may simply be unaware of the proper procedures, and he may wish to clarify that. I shall happily take his point of order at the end.

Mr Hilditch: Question 8 has been withdrawn, not transferred, so it is misinformation to the House.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Member for indicating that — that was the information that I have before me in writing. Question 6, in the name of Mr

McGrady, question 10, in the name of Mr R Hutchinson, question 14, in the name of Mr Byrne and question 15, in the name of Mr McElduff, have been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

Adults with Learning Disabilities (University or Training Places)

1. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many university or training places are available for adults with learning disabilities.

(AQO 682/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): As it is my first Question Time, I wish to assure the Member of my commitment, during my term as Minister for Employment and Learning, to do all that I can to improve opportunities for people with learning disabilities to access the full range of training and learning.

My Department funds a wide range of education and training provision that is available to people with learning disabilities. Applications to universities and further education colleges from people with disabilities are assessed according to the same entry criteria that apply to all students. My Department's training programmes are open to people with learning disabilities, and my Department supports several organisations that provide training specifically for people with learning disabilities. The Department provides a range of practical and financial help through its disablement advisory service.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat. First and foremost, I wish to congratulate the Minister on her new post. Undoubtedly, she will carry out her work with the dignity and respect that it deserves.

Has everyone with a learning disability been given equal rights to choice, opportunity and respect, with the support that they need in university and in places of training? Does the Minister agree that they should not have to depend on charity or handouts to take their places in society, whether they are young or old, and whatever the nature and severity of their disability?

Ms Hanna: I agree with the Member. Between 1997 and 2002, my Department has committed approximately £480,000 of funding to encourage high-quality provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. There is also a widening access premium for students with disabilities. That funding amounted to £202,000 for 2001-02. It is determined by the proportion of students that each university recruits who are in receipt of disabled students' allowance.

Mr Beggs: Under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, universities and further education colleges have a responsibility to promote equality of opportunity for all who are disabled. Does the Minister agree that

it will be difficult to test how far that laudable goal is being achieved, given the lack of statistics on the size of the disabled population?

Ms Hanna: I agree that that is difficult without the statistics, but people with a learning disability are not obliged to state it. Therefore, collecting statistics can be difficult.

Mr Speaker: Mr Alex Maskey is not in his place for question 2, but I have been advised that the reason for his absence is a serious family illness. It is only right that the House knows that. Mr John Fee is also not in his place for question 3, and I have had no message in that regard.

December Monitoring Round (Departmental Bids)

4. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the bids made by her Department in the December monitoring round. (AQO 693/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department made five bids in the December monitoring round: £1.5 million to meet pressures from individual learning accounts; £1 million for additional grant aid to Lisburn Institute of Further and Higher Education; £632,000 for further education capital costs; £660,000 in respect of training centre receipts no longer receivable by the Department; and £300,000 to meet increases in stipends to post-graduate students.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the Minister to her first Question Time. I congratulate her on her appointment, especially as she is the third woman in Government. I wish her well in her role. Can the Minister outline how the underspend has arisen?

Ms Hanna: I thank the Member for her good wishes. I welcome the opportunity to clarify the matter because there has been some disinformation circulating about that. The net surrender for one year of my Department's resource budget is £21.2 million. That net figure is the difference between the gross amount surrendered of £40.3 million and net allocation to bids met by my Department of £19.1 million.

As Members will be aware, monitoring rounds are held four times a year when all Departments — and I stress that this applies to all Departments — are asked to identify areas in which they expect to spend less than was provided for, to surrender those amounts and to submit bids for additional expenditure where there is need. No Department is permitted to reallocate within its own budget. The monitoring rounds are a useful way to ensure that the money voted by the Assembly is maximised and can be reallocated to meet emerging priorities, as decided by the Executive. I stress that it is not wasted money. It is an intricate part of our budgeting process.

Mr Speaker: Mr Sammy Wilson is not in his place for question 5.

Building Sustainable Prosperity

7. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the timetable for the process of awarding funding under the building sustainable prosperity programme. (AQO 684/01)

Ms Hanna: The Department is responsible for administering the employment priorities of the programme for building sustainable prosperity. In November, the Department issued calls for project applications for several measures in the priority. Those applications will be appraised this month and next, and it is expected that selection panels will meet in the second half of February. The intention is that all projects which are successful under those measures will receive offers of funding in March.

The Department made a call for the remaining measure on 17 January, with applications due by 1 March. It is intended that offers of funding under that measure will be issued to successful projects in April.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Minister say how much money is available under that programme and who can apply for it?

Ms Hanna: A total of £21 million will be available for projects in the next two years. There will then be a further call for applications in respect of a similar amount. The call for applications and the availability of funding are good news for the many groups who have been waiting for this opportunity. A wide range of organisations may apply, including voluntary, community, and education and training organisations. The only exclusions under the European social fund regulations are individuals, sole traders and organisations that are not legally constituted.

Task Force on Employability

9. **Mr O'Neill** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide an update on the work of the task force on employability and long-term unemployment. (AQO 698/01)

Ms Hanna: The task force has completed the engagement process and is now involved in ongoing bilateral meetings with relevant Government Departments to consider and analyse the main issues arising from the process. The results will be drawn together to form the first draft of the action plan.

Mr O'Neill: I thank the Minister for her answer. I welcome her to her new position, which I know she will carry out with distinction. Will the Minister outline

some of the issues that have emerged from the engagement process?

Ms Hanna: I thank the Member for his good wishes. A few broad themes have already emerged from replies to the discussion document and engagement meetings. Those include the benefit system, specifically the benefits trap and the fear of moving from benefit to employment, the availability and affordability of childcare provision and transport, to name but a few. Those concerns, along with others, are being pursued with the relevant Departments through the bilateral meetings.

Research and Development (Discussions with Universities)

11. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions she has had with universities on research and development. (AQO 691/01)

Ms Hanna: The Northern Ireland Economic Council's (NIEC) report highlights the particular significance of university research to economic development here. In the light of that, the Executive recommended the development of commercially-focused and co-ordinated research and development, and an innovative strategy for Northern Ireland to drive on the knowledge-based momentum.

I have partly answered the question. I am ahead of myself here. No doubt the Member for South Belfast will know.

Mr Speaker: There is no harm in a new Minister's being ahead of herself. Keeping up the momentum subsequently is not the same thing.

Dr McDonnell: I congratulate the Minister and encourage her to stay ahead of herself.

Does the Minister agree that university research plays a vital role in the development of Northern Ireland on the back of that? However, may I ask that the enthusiasm that she mentioned earlier be reinforced in the future?

Ms Hanna: I agree with the Member that research is an integral part of our universities. Indeed, it is essential. It has been highlighted by the NIEC, and it has also been highlighted by the Member for South Belfast on many occasions.

3.15 pm

Further and Higher Education Services

12. **Dr Birnie** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give her assessment of the adequacy of available statistics on the uptake of further and

higher education services under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. (AQO 687/01)

Ms Hanna: The Department and the institutes of further and higher education have made significant progress on the collection of data in relation to section 75 since becoming designated under the terms of the legislation. For a comprehensive analysis, I refer the Member to data that has already been sent to him, which amount to several pages and would not be appropriate to repeat.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Minister for her reply and welcome her to her new post. I refer the Minister to her Department's publication, the 'Labour Market Bulletin', of November 2001. On page 155, various researchers in the Training and Employment Agency point out that there is a lack of sufficient data on the number of persons eligible for both further and higher education in respect of many categories of section 75, notably by sex, religion and disablement. Does the Minister not recognise that her Department asks a lot of colleges and universities to monitor the equality-of-opportunity impact of their policies when the data hardly exist for them to do so at present?

Ms Hanna: I agree with the Member. It can be difficult to collect the data, especially when people are not obliged to give the information. That is part of the problem.

Colleges of Further Education: Budgets

13. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the colleges of further education that have exceeded their budgets and what steps she intends to take to rectify the matter. (AQO 679/01)

Ms Hanna: Castlereagh College, the Lisburn Institute, the North East Institute, the North West Institute and Omagh College reported an operating deficit in the 2000-01 financial year. The Department requires colleges that have an operating deficit and a worsening financial situation to develop financial recovery plans.

Mr Dallat: I add my congratulations to the Minister on her appointment. What action has been taken in respect of the colleges that she has mentioned?

Ms Hanna: Castlereagh College, the Lisburn Institute and Omagh College have developed financial recovery plans. The North East Institute is in the process of developing a financial recovery plan. Through monitoring, my Department has learnt that the North West Institute has gone from two years of an operating surplus to an operating deficit. My Department has appointed consultants to establish, first, why the deficit has occurred and is of such significance and, secondly, why the full extent of the deficit became clear only in the final financial year monitoring returns.

Mr Speaker: Mr McFarland is not in his place for question 16.

Springvale Campus

17. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if the initial key objectives of the new educational campus at Springvale are included in the current draft academic plan; and to make a statement. (AQO 708/01)

Ms Hanna: The second draft of the academic plan is being developed by the two institutions in support of the initial objectives for the campus and will be available for consultation shortly. The responses from the community to the first draft of the plan provided valuable community perspectives, and those have been analysed and included in the second draft.

Mrs Nelis: I thank the Minister for her reply and welcome her to Question Time. Will she reassure the Assembly that the initial objectives for community education have not been watered down and that the draft academic plan will include adequate provision for the Irish language?

Ms Hanna: The objectives and the plan will not be watered down in any way, and the main purpose of the Springvale campus — that the curriculum must meet the needs of local people by improving their quality of life and by making people more employable — will most certainly be implemented.

Mr K Robinson: I also add my congratulations to the Minister on her elevation, and remind her that, from the corridor that we once shared, several other Members have been elevated in a variety of degrees — the noble Lord Kilclooney, Mr Dermot Nesbitt and, most recently, Mr Mark Durkan.

The Springfield campus will operate in an area where, traditionally, there has been limited progression from school to either further or higher education. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister recently commissioned research on the subject of such non-progression, which seems especially marked among Protestant, working-class males. Will the Minister's Department respond to such research findings, and, if so, how?

Ms Hanna: I assure the Member that we shall certainly respond to those findings.

Mr Speaker: I was rather wondering if the supplementary reference to Members who have been elevated was less for the attention of the Minister and more for the attention of someone else who may be able to change those circumstances — *[Laughter]*.

Individual Learning Accounts Scheme

18. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress has been made in reviewing

the provision of support to adult learners following the withdrawal of the individual learning accounts scheme. (AQO 695/01)

Ms Hanna: The review of the national individual learning accounts (ILA) scheme, as it has operated in Northern Ireland, is under way. I hope to announce replacement arrangements as soon as possible. In the meantime, anyone who needs advice on any education or training course, and the support that may be available, should contact the learndirect freefone helpline.

Ms Lewsley: I would like to add my voice of welcome to the Minister — I wish her well in her new post.

Will the review take account of the success of the ILA scheme in attracting to learning those who might not otherwise have undertaken an education or training course?

Ms Hanna: I thank the Member for her good wishes.

Although there were some problems with the operation of the original ILA scheme, they should not mask the fact that the scheme had many positive effects. My aim is to build on the successful aspects while addressing those issues of concern and to tailor new arrangements more closely to Northern Ireland's learning needs.

Dearing Report

19. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress has been made in implementing the recommendations arising from the Dearing Report. (AQO 663/01)

Ms Hanna: Good progress has been made in respect of each of the five Northern Ireland recommendations that arose from the Dearing Report, and, in particular, with those concerned with the developing role of higher education institutions in economic development, the provision of additional higher education places and the increased volume and quality of research activities in universities.

Mr Weir: I would like to add my congratulations to the Minister on her elevation, which, perhaps unlike previous Members, is not meant as a hint for elevation on my part — I think that fairly unlikely anyway. I wish her good luck.

Will the Minister provide more information on one of the central recommendations with regard to the Northern Ireland aspect of the Dearing Report, which was the expansion of student numbers? How does the Department view the balance between the various options that were outlined in the Dearing Report for routes by which those numbers could be expanded?

Ms Hanna: Members will be aware that 1,000 new higher education places are coming on-stream. That is from the student support review, which begins in

September. However, the provision of any further higher education places will depend on the outcome of the spending review for 2002.

Mr Speaker: I do not see Mr Armstrong in his place. The Minister remarked earlier that she appeared to be ahead of herself. She is so far ahead of herself and the rest of the Members that none of them is available to ask her any further questions — *[Laughter]*.

The sitting was suspended at 3.25 pm.

3.30 pm

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the House that question 5 in the name of Mr Barry McElduff and question 7 in the name of Mr Mick Murphy have been withdrawn.

Housing Executive Waiting List (Intimidation)

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Social Development to specify the number of applicants currently on the Housing Executive waiting list who were forced to flee their homes following attack or intimidation from terror groups. (AQO 678/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds):

At the end of December 2001 the waiting list included 344 persons accepted as homeless due to intimidation. The information system does not record the source of intimidation.

Mr Dallat: Can the Minister assure the House that the procedure followed in each district housing area is adequate to meet the seriousness of each applicant's safety and needs? Will he take all steps possible to ensure that displaced families are rehoused without delay? Finally, will the Minister make sure that families who decide not to move are afforded every assistance to make their homes safe from the thugs who are trying to kill them?

Mr Dodds: All Members of the House will condemn the intimidation of people from their homes, whether they are in social rented accommodation or privately owned homes. The situation is disgraceful and despicable. No one deserves to be intimidated out of his home for any reason.

We have no reason to believe that there is not consistency across the district offices or that different standards are being applied. I would be concerned if that were the case. If the Member has any such examples that he wishes to draw to my attention, perhaps he will write to me. I can assure Mr Dallat, and other Members, that the Housing Executive acts speedily when people are

intimidated from their homes. Action is, of course, dependent on a police report.

When families decide not to move in spite of intimidation, that is a matter for them, but the Housing Executive, in various areas of the Province, does take action to secure properties by installing secondary glazing and taking other measures. If someone is intimidated and is under threat, the Housing Executive will allocate him a substantial number of points for transfer.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Minister outline in more detail the steps he can take to help those who have been intimidated from their homes?

Mr Dodds: The Member will know, because it has been reported in the news recently, that the Housing Executive runs the scheme for the purchase of evacuated dwellings (SPED), which is intended to help home owners. It allows the Housing Executive to buy houses at market value when the Chief Constable issues a certificate confirming that the owner has been intimidated and is in danger. Properties that are purchased under that scheme are then resold on the open market.

Secondly, the acquisition of satisfactory houses scheme (ASH) allows the Housing Executive to purchase houses to meet individually urgent housing needs, which may or may not be a result of intimidation. As I said in answer to the previous question, if people are accepted as having been intimidated out of their homes, the Housing Executive will ensure that they are awarded sufficient points under the common selection scheme to enable them to go to the top of the list for allocation of social housing. There is also the emergency grants scheme, which allows the Housing Executive to pay a small amount of grant aid to help one of its own tenants, someone in social rented accommodation or a home owner to cover the initial expenses associated with the need to move. That grant stands at £199.

Housing Executive: Purchase of Properties

2. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of properties purchased by the Housing Executive in each council area over the last five years due to the intimidation of tenants.

(AQO 683/01)

Mr Dodds: During the last five years the Housing Executive purchased 12 properties to facilitate the rehousing of its tenants affected by intimidation. All of these were in Belfast and stemmed from the so-called Shankill feud, which occurred in the summer of 2000.

Ten of the dwellings were acquired in the financial year 2000-01, which involved expenditure of some £560,000, and two dwellings were acquired in the financial year 2001-02, which involved expenditure of some £133,000.

As I said, under the special purchase of evacuated dwellings (SPED) scheme, the Housing Executive also purchases houses from owner-occupiers who have been intimidated from their homes. That information is held neither by constituency nor for the last five years. However, I refer the Member to my written answer to AQW 1071/01 in the Official Report volume 13 No WA6, of 11 January 2002, which gives figures by Housing Executive district office for the 12-month period from 1 December to 30 November in each of the last two years.

Mr Gallagher: We understand that people are often caught up in those unfortunate circumstances as a result of sectarian intimidation, which, unfortunately, appears to be increasing. Is the Minister satisfied that Housing Executive offices in all areas are able to respond speedily and effectively when enquiries come from people who are caught up in such circumstances?

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive must respond speedily in such situations. When such situations arise, people are in desperate circumstances. Sometimes there is a slight delay in dealing with them if, for example, there is a delay in getting the necessary report from the police. In addition to receiving the police report, the Housing Executive will make enquiries, because it must be satisfied that the criteria for homelessness due to intimidation are met. If the Member is concerned about specific examples and wishes to draw my attention to them, I will be happy to receive the information and have them investigated.

I refer again to my written answer to Assembly question 1071/01, cases where houses have been purchased by the Housing Executive under SPED are fairly well spread throughout the province. Districts such as Belfast 6, Carrickfergus and Belfast 5 have more purchases under SPED. However, in virtually every district there are examples of the Housing Executive's having to purchase houses under the SPED scheme.

Mr Kane: How much of the Minister's departmental budget will be spent on SPED this year?

Mr Dodds: Unfortunately, far more money must be spent on the SPED scheme than any Member would wish. However, the scheme is led by demand. It must be remembered that the houses that are purchased under that scheme will eventually be re-sold on the open market. Therefore, the Department is able to recoup much of the money. In the current financial year, to the end of December 2001, 88 houses have been bought by the Housing Executive under the SPED scheme and subsequently sold on the open market at a cost of around £7.5 million. It is expected that that amount could rise to £11.5 million by the end of the financial year.

Sir John Gorman: Northern Ireland has the highest rate of homelessness in the UK, with 12,600 cases in

the last year, 254 of which came from north Belfast. Can the Minister advise us how social problems — such as lack of social harmony and poor community relations — might be improved in the community in general, and north Belfast in particular?

Mr Dodds: The Member's question raises issues that are relevant to the Department for Social Development; however, they also go beyond it. I accept the premise of his question, which is that there are grave social and economic issues in north Belfast. Those issues underlay the difficulties that are being discussed and lead to a situation in which so many cases are being presented as a result of intimidation.

However, in December, 70 applicants presented themselves to the Housing Executive as homeless due to intimidation. Those are not classified in relation to paramilitary threats but stem from intimidation of any kind. Of those cases, 17 originated in north Belfast. The remainder originated elsewhere. The problem is, therefore, not only confined to north Belfast. The figures for December show that the majority of cases are happening outside that area.

Housing Allocation (Points System)

3. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans the Housing Executive has to change the procedure for awarding points when allocating housing. (AQO 674/01)

Mr Dodds: Any changes to the common selection scheme will depend on the outcome of an evaluation that is in its early stages. When the current scheme was implemented in November 2000, it was recognised that after a reasonable period of operation, an evaluation would be necessary in order to confirm that the new scheme was meeting its aims. The aims of the scheme are to ensure that the allocation of social housing is made on a fair and equitable basis, and that housing is more closely matched to the needs of applicants.

Although there are no indications that the scheme fails to deliver, the evaluation — involving the Housing Executive, the housing association movement and the Department for Social Development — commenced in December 2001. It is envisaged that the findings of the evaluation will be summarised and circulated for wide consultation during April and May 2002.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Minister agree that there is widespread concern that the present system for allocating housing does not cater sufficiently for the local resident? The outsider is favoured in some cases, which causes the local person much annoyance.

Mr Dodds: The Member made a similar representation as a result of an oral question that he tabled in November

2001, which was on the same issue in relation to new homes in the Portaferry area.

The Housing Executive is aware of the concerns of many local representatives on that issue when they raise the origin of applicants and the allocation of tenancies under the selection scheme. The scheme is under evaluation, and the results of that will be published and circulated for consultation later in the spring. The Housing Executive and the Department for Social Development will be listening closely to the outcome of that consultation process, into which Members will want to feed their thoughts. The Department will have the benefit of hearing everyone's views on that and other issues when it comes to making its decisions.

Mr Shannon: Can the Minister confirm the situation regarding housing associations and their compliance with the selection scheme? Do they operate the same points system? Do they operate in conjunction with the Housing Executive? Are they all working together on the same system?

Mr Dodds: Housing associations and the Housing Executive do operate a common selection scheme. Therefore everybody comes within that scheme. If there are people who are dissatisfied with the way in which housing associations are allocating houses, those associations are subject to performance verification by the Department for Social Development every two or three years. The Department will carry out a visit to ensure that there is compliance with its performance standards. If there is not, there will be further visits in order to establish an improvement plan.

Housing associations do apply the same system. Mechanisms are in place to ensure that there is proper monitoring and compliance.

3.45 pm

Housing Allocation (Means-Testing)

4. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister for Social Development whether he will consider the introduction of amending legislation to facilitate the exemption of means-testing of parents of disabled children whose homes need adaptation. (AQO 709/01)

Mr Dodds: I refer the Member to my written response to Mr McClarty's question (AQW 1299/01), which is contained in the Official Report, volume 13, No WA 7 of 18 January 2002. I stated that I have no such plans at present, but I have asked officials to review the means test element of the disabled facilities grant generally. The review will also provide advice on the potential for change and implications relating to equality and other aspects. That may take time, as the views of other agencies will need to be sought. I will respond more fully when all the considerations are complete.

Mrs Nelis: I thank the Minister for his encouraging response. The Minister is aware of the Homes Fit for Children campaign, which deals with the issue, and of the Housing Executive's support for the removal of means-testing for such adaptations. I am heartened that he is examining the matter. When can disabled children and their parents expect to access homes that are adequate for their lifelong living needs?

Mr Dodds: It is an important issue, and the parents of disabled children in that situation are worthy of help. Under the means test Regulations such parents have been given additional help from November 2000 in the form of increased housing allowance, which is increased in line with inflation. Parents of disabled children currently receive £67·08, by comparison with the £51·60 awarded to all other applicants. The allowance enables more low-income families to qualify for grant aid.

Furthermore, the provisions of the draft Housing Bill that relate to the disabled facilities grant will continue to impose a mandatory duty on the Housing Executive to provide that grant, unlike other awards. Additional discretionary grant aid may be available if the cost of the mandatory scheme exceeds the grant limit.

Despite all that, I am aware of the issues and the representations. As I said, I have asked officials to carry out the review, and I will consider the matter seriously.

Ms Lewsley: I thank the Minister for his lengthy answer. During the review will the Minister consider that, under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, there is nothing to prevent advantageous action? As such, the Department could consider exempting from means-testing any adaptations that are made to the homes of disabled children.

Mr Dodds: I take the Member's point. The issue concerns the means-testing of parents of disabled children. Certain issues need to be explored in detail. The hon Member's point will be borne in mind as the review proceeds.

Closing Orders in County Fermanagh

6. **Mr Morrow** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of closing orders that have been served in the past five years on properties in County Fermanagh. (AQO 661/01)

Mr Dodds: Two hundred and ninety-five closing orders were served in County Fermanagh in the past five complete financial years.

Mr Morrow: Of those 295, how many were occupied when the closing orders were served?

Mr Dodds: That information is not readily available, because a manual search of all the records would be needed to access it. However, I will welcome and respond to

representations by Members who are concerned about that issue, and who forwards to me the details of any specific case that they want investigated.

Housing Executive (House Sales Scheme)

8. **Ms Gildernew** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline any plans to revise the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's house sales scheme.

(AQO 703/01)

Mr Dodds: A wide-ranging consultation on proposals to change the Housing Executive's house sales scheme was recently completed. The responses are being considered, and it is expected that final proposals will be submitted to the Housing Executive's board at its February meeting. Subsequently, I will consider the board's recommendations.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. When will any changes be likely to take effect? Can he confirm that under the terms of the revised scheme tenants in rural areas will not be prevented from purchasing their homes?

Mr Dodds: As I said, the final proposals will be submitted to the Housing Executive's board in February. It will then be a matter for consideration by the Department. I will want to consider carefully those matters, not least the representations of Members and others, as well as those that have yet to be made.

The current legislation provides for tenants in rural areas to buy their homes. There are no plans to change that.

Mr Clyde: What is the position of housing association tenants who wish to buy their homes?

Mr Dodds: Eighteen housing associations operate a voluntary house sales scheme identical to that provided by the Housing Executive. Two hundred and twenty housing association properties have been sold to tenants. Those figures may appear low, by comparison with those for Housing Executive sales, but the Housing Executive owns more stock than the housing associations.

The Housing Bill that I will introduce will require all housing associations to operate house sales schemes that are identical to the Housing Executive's.

Mr Beggs: Is the Minister aware that existing housing association tenants could face increased costs if some sales proceed, and if some banks hold housing associations to the terms of their loan agreement? Some existing housing association tenants are unable to purchase their homes, and many could fall within TSN criteria. How will the Minister ensure that those people will not bear additional bank costs if they remain as housing association tenants?

Mr Dodds: Most housing associations run a scheme that is identical to the Housing Executive's. That will continue after the introduction of the Housing Bill, which will oblige housing associations to implement a house sales scheme, as opposed to their having the power to operate such a scheme.

The Housing Executive will examine the issue of bank charges in connection with the current review of the right to buy scheme. If the Member has specific concerns on the matter he should submit them to that review. I will be happy to consider the matter, although it has not heretofore been raised with me as a major issue of concern.

Housing Executive (Home Adaptations)

9. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the timescale for adaptations to Housing Executive properties, in particular for young people who are inadvertently injured while taking part in sports. (AQO 697/01)

Mr Dodds: Although the Housing Executive does not have a specific programme for carrying out adaptations to its properties to facilitate young people who are inadvertently injured while taking part in sports, it does carry out a wide range of works to adapt its properties to suit people with disabilities. The time taken varies considerably, according to the type of work required.

Mrs Courtney: The Minister has confirmed that it is difficult to get adaptations carried out in reasonable time. That can have a disastrous effect on some families. Will he therefore ensure that a strategy is planned for people in that position?

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive's current adaptations process should, and will, cover any cases involving the people whom the Member identified — people who are inadvertently injured while participating in sports — and they can be dealt with in accordance with the adaptations policy. Regardless of whether a person suffers a disability as the result of a sports injury, a car accident or an injury in the home, the scheme will pick up all such cases.

I take the Member's point about the speed of the adaptation process. Members will be interested to know that the Housing Executive and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are reviewing the housing adaptation service with the aim of speeding up aspects of that work. It is hoped that a final report will be produced in spring of this year.

However, that has not stopped various improvements to the service either taking place or being planned. For example, it has been agreed that minor works, such as the installation of handrails and lever taps, and the widening of garden paths for wheelchair users, can be undertaken directly by the Housing Executive without

the need to involve an occupational therapist. In many cases, the need for that involvement is the reason for delays in adaptation work. People must get a recommendation from an occupational therapist for much of the work, and, in some cases, getting a visit from an occupational therapist can take months, if not years.

Those issues fall outside my departmental responsibility, but we are working to increase the number of smaller measures that can be taken without the need to refer the matter to an occupational therapist.

Housing Executive (Register of Approved Contractors)

12. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of contractors that have been removed from the NIHE register of approved contractors due to non-completion or bad workmanship over the past three years. (AQO 671/01)

Mr Dodds: The information that the Member seeks is not readily available. However, in the year ending March 2001, no firms were removed solely for poor performance.

Mr Hilditch: Can the Minister give his assessment of the situation in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area, and, specifically, the renovation schemes at Drumhoy Drive, Ederny Walk and Salia Avenue?

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for his question.

Mr Speaker: It was a rather specific question.

Mr Dodds: It was a very specific question. The Member has been assiduous in his constituency duties, and it is not the first time that he has raised the issue. I have, therefore, been able to anticipate, to some extent, the sort of question that he might ask. Once again, he has lived up to his reputation.

Mr Speaker: Order. Is it another case of a well-prepared Minister happening to have a paragraph to hand?

Mr Dodds: I am grateful, Mr Speaker, for your compliment about being well prepared. However, I anticipated that the Member might raise that issue with regard to Carrickfergus, and I can confirm that the penultimate phase of the scheme that he referred to for the Salia Avenue, Drumhoy Drive and Ederny Walk areas of Carrickfergus will be completed by mid-March 2002.

Mr Speaker: That brings us to the end of Question Time. I am not sure whether a Member had a point of order which she wished to raise, but that may have passed now.

4.00 pm

POST OFFICE PROVISION

Mr Dallat: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes proposals by Consignia to cut the number of post offices in Britain by half and calls for immediate action to protect the infrastructure of post offices in Northern Ireland, particularly those serving people in rural and disadvantaged urban areas.

I am grateful for the opportunity to bring the motion before the House. Since the threat of post office closures became a matter of concern and was debated in the Assembly some time ago, little, if any, progress has been made in planning a successful future for this essential service. The Post Office has a new name, Consignia, but we have precious little else, except mounting evidence that the Post Office is fast approaching meltdown for those who reside in rural and socially disadvantaged urban areas. These are not just my views; people much closer to the Post Office, who experience the problems every day, share these views.

Opportunities to develop the Post Office as a key centre for communications and public services, including new e-government initiatives, Internet access and many other possibilities have been missed. In the meantime, the closure of post offices, rural post offices and sub-post offices is increasing as postmasters retire and replacements cannot be found. As we speak, 28% of sub-postmasters in rural areas and 35% in deprived urban areas are actively considering leaving the Post Office. A third of rural sub-postmasters who wish to leave cited loss of income as the main reason. Many sub-postmasters actively seek new business opportunities and feel frustrated by constraints and what they see as the Post Office's lack of dynamism with regard to developing new services and marketing those already provided.

All this is happening at a time when more than 90% of customers and residents in rural and deprived urban areas still firmly believe that post offices have a key role to play in the day-to-day life of our communities. A comprehensive survey, *Post Offices and Community Needs in Rural and Deprived Urban Areas*, which was carried out last September, states that 61% of deprived urban customers and 69% of rural customers use their local post offices to obtain what are called "free" community information and services. Up to 41% of customers obtain informal advice from sub-postmasters, and 29% obtain Government information. We cannot afford to lose this service, because we are committed to targeting social need (TSN), and the Post Office plays a vital role in delivering information about a variety of Government services that help to create equality of

standard of living, which everyone is entitled to, but which not everyone receives.

We have been told that the Government are committed to keeping rural post offices open, but there is little evidence to show that anything practical has been done to make this a certainty. The fate of the post offices in socially deprived urban areas appears to be sealed. The decision to close post offices will be taken in the full knowledge that they provide a lifeline to many people, not least the elderly and families that cannot afford to travel to town centre outlets.

In Northern Ireland there is already worrying evidence of the decline in the standard of service offered by the Post Office and Parcel Force. This has been well publicised by the Northern Ireland committee of Postwatch, the consumer watchdog, in its news release of 5 December 2001. None of those failings is attributed to the postal workers, who do a sterling job. The failings were attributed to Consignia, which needs to be encouraged to comprehensively assess the needs of its customers and deliver a service to meet those demands. Today there is further criticism from the Federation of Small Businesses of Consignia's plan to delay some deliveries until afternoons.

I suggest that the future of our post offices is a key element in delivering a service fit for the modern age. To date, the focus has been firmly on the necessity to get Consignia into shape to be sold to the private sector. Little serious regard has been given to the essential service which it provides for the whole community, and particularly for those who live in rural communities or socially disadvantaged urban areas.

Speaking last October, a Northern Ireland spokesperson for the National Federation of SubPostmasters warned that the restructuring of the Post Office would mean survival of the fittest for some postmasters. He predicted that many post offices would close, and that already it may be too late for some of them. We accept that efforts are being made to find new business. However, many of those outlets will be gone if and when decisive action is taken. By then, the network will have become eroded to offices in centres of high population only.

Next year, post offices will lose a huge chunk of their business when social security payments are due to be made by automatic credit transfers payable through banks. That will bring its own problems for many people who live in small communities, where there is a post office but no bank. It will also create problems for people who do not have, or want, bank accounts but who believe that they are entitled to their payments with the minimum of inconvenience and outlay.

Post offices often double up as mini-markets, providing essential items such as milk, bread, coal and other necessities. There is every possibility that when a post

office closes, so too will the shop, thus compounding the isolation problems.

Progress on the development of a universal bank by the Post Office is disappointing, and its efforts to promote Post Office banking services in their current form is also to be regretted. Must they wait until the writing is on the wall for the more vulnerable post offices? The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has pledged his support for the retention of post offices in rural and urban areas, but what will be the value of such a pledge when this public service is privatised, and the focus moves to maximising profits, which can be made only in areas of large population? Action is needed, but nothing is happening. My understanding is that no pilot study is taking place in Northern Ireland, where the needs of our people are quite different from those in Leicestershire and Rutland, where studies are taking place.

I would like the Assembly to take a direct interest in the future of the Post Office, and I look forward to hearing about any developments. I wish to see a task force being set up to define a strategy that meets the needs of the people of Northern Ireland. I would encourage much closer co-operation with the postal services in the Republic, where similar dilemmas are being experienced as a direct result of pressure from the European Union to free up postal services in order to encourage competition. Greater efforts must be made to define service standards, and clearly understood procedures must be put in place to deal with proposed post office closures. People must be made aware that the Post Office continues to exploit opportunities for new commercial services and pay for the cost of introducing those services. The problem of attracting new sub-postmasters must be addressed by the introduction of new and relevant financial and delivery packages. That is what is happening in other sectors of industry and commerce where, for whatever reason, there are recruitment problems, and there is no reason why the Post Office should not do likewise.

The Post Office plays a key role in the delivery of Government and community information. If that service is lost, the socially disadvantaged, the marginalised and the elderly will suffer most. There must be a clearer definition of post offices' public, private and community information and advisory role, and a move away from indirect subsidy through the Post Office to more direct subsidies for this essential service which, to date, has not had a financial value placed on it.

I look forward to a stimulating debate, and I hope that those who have the future of the Post Office in their hands will listen and take what is being said seriously, because it is not simply a matter of post offices closing — the future of entire communities is at stake. We, and the Government Departments for which we now have responsibility, have a part to play. It would be unfortunate if all the efforts made to regenerate

rural and socially disadvantaged urban communities were harmed in such a damaging way by the closure of sub-post offices on a grand scale.

Mr Beggs: I thank Mr Dallat for highlighting the plight of the existing post office network. While the closure plans of Consignia are reported to apply solely to England, Scotland and Wales, there should be no doubt that similar financial pressures exist in Northern Ireland and will apply to our sub-post office network. Consignia, whose postal services cover the entire United Kingdom, is reported to have lost £281 million during the first six months of the current financial year. It is clear that there are significant financial forces afoot, which are dictating the change to our existing post office network. It is not just a matter of making a report — there are real financial pressures at work here, which are forcing, and continuing to force, the closure of many sub-post offices against communities' wishes.

I am concerned at the vagueness of some of the recent reports and comments from Consignia spokespersons. For instance, they have said that some of the 17,500 post offices are not viable. They say that they have no intention of closing 1,000 post offices, and then add the word "soon" — maybe not this week, but what about next week?

Finally, the network is making a loss, and something has to be done to make as many of these post offices as viable as possible. What is being done? I have not heard of any concrete work being done by the Post Office itself. We have heard hints about things that are going to happen and things that they are investigating. We have heard suggestions by the Labour Government for introducing alternative means of funding, but no concrete proposals as yet.

With particular reference to Northern Ireland, the 'News Letter' in a report on Consignia only last week said that Consignia had said that it was "too early to say" how many urban post offices would be affected by the restructuring programme and that

"The details of the programme are still being discussed".

Clearly there are moves afoot that will affect not only the largely rural population in Northern Ireland, but also much of the urban population, and it is the deprived urban population that is likely to suffer most.

There was a sustained decline in the post office network throughout the United Kingdom during the last decade. It has been reported that approximately 200 post offices closed each year, but 384 closed during 1999. According to the Postal Service Commission's report in December 2001, the number of sub-postmasters who are resigning has not increased substantially over the last couple of years, but there is evidence of a reduction in the number of people showing an interest in replacing those who do resign, particularly in small

rural communities. So, while existing postmasters are hanging on, replacing them is not an attractive option at present. Financial pressures are largely responsible for the closures, so taking a sub-postmaster's job is not an attractive proposition at present.

In a House of Commons Hansard report of 12 April 2000, the Prime Minister indicated another pressure:

“Half a million more people a year choose to get their pension or child benefit through their bank accounts. That will carry on, so inevitably the post offices are faced with a process of change. The question is how to deal with it. The best way is make sure that people can get their benefits in cash, if they want to do so, but that we work with the post offices to provide a new range of services for the future.”

That was said nearly two years ago, and I have not heard of any new services or new financial streams to keep our post offices sustainable.

4.15 pm

The Post Office's largest contract is with the Benefits Agency, and that is shrinking because people are choosing to take direct payments. The contract for paying benefits is up for renewal and this, in itself, creates huge doubt within the post office network. For the record, my preference is for the Post Office to get another contract, because, as well as providing a good social security benefit delivery service, there are many other benefits for the community.

At European level there is additional pressure, with the Directive on postal liberalisation, which is making postal deliveries increasingly more competitive. The Directive is also reducing the Post Office's ability to transfer money and support sub-post offices. There is a range of financial pressures afoot.

I welcomed the announcement last year that shops and post offices in rural villages and hamlets would get a rate rebate of 50% to 100%. That has been a positive benefit, but is it enough? It appears not. The decline is continuing, and the Assembly must assess which particular services it would find beneficial to contract to post offices. This could take the form of providing access to Government information. Their existing telecommunications network provides them with an existing infrastructure, and I urge that serious consideration be given to a proposal that would make it possible to give financial assistance to sub-post offices.

I have some criticism of the Post Office itself. Its senior management is slow to react to market forces. The power card scheme, for example, which was operated by NIE, was subsequently replaced by a keypad system. The Post Office originally tendered for the business but was not successful. No subsequent tenders were submitted, and, as a result, that aspect of business was lost to other competitors.

In addition, the Post Office has been preventing sub-post offices from introducing other systems that

would enable it to retain that aspect of the business. It is unhelpful that the Post Office — having lost contracts — still insists on developing its own wonderful system, which will come too late. Unless it reacts to market forces, that aspect of the business will be lost to competitors. There are enormous pressures from a variety of sources, and senior Post Office management must become more proactive.

Another aspect that is putting off potential new sub-postmasters is the large number of robberies that have occurred at post offices. One sub-post office in my constituency was robbed three times in the past year. This activity is putting additional cost burdens on sub-post offices; it puts a community facility at risk and must be deplored. If offices eventually close, there will be a huge public outcry. Can we not be more proactive? Are there any procedures whereby additional support can be given to those sub-post offices to assist them with security and ensure that they will remain in business and that their staff will feel safe?

Post offices, which are still a reserved matter, are not being handled well. The Assembly should apply pressure on the Government in London to ensure that the issue will be addressed, because no proposals have come forward about this in almost two years. It is time for concrete proposals, so that our existing post-office network can grow confident that it will have a future and will be able to see that investment will secure, in the long term, not only its existence, but benefits for the wider community too, because people rely on access to a post office.

Mrs I Robinson: The news that Consignia is to dump around 30,000 employees to address spiralling company debts has sent a shock wave through the company from top to bottom and into every sector of its current operations. It is therefore inevitable that the repercussions of such a huge number of redundancies will be felt in every constituency, borough and town throughout Northern Ireland. The loss of 30,000 jobs represents an overall figure of one in six of the current workforce, which is absolutely staggering.

I have already contacted the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Its representatives are unable to make any comment on the crisis, as they claim that it is a reserved matter and that the Northern Ireland Office has responsibility. Neither that Department nor the NIO know the extent of the impact that these job losses will have in Northern Ireland — they simply know that job losses are inevitable. If the job losses are spread equally around the United Kingdom, as many as 850 people in Northern Ireland could find themselves without work. It is therefore impossible to imagine how services are to be maintained across the Province, and to assess the impact that the job losses will have, especially on rural life.

This is not just a straightforward case of a privately owned company being priced out of the market, but this is a publicly owned company that provides a service, which is in deep financial crisis. There is an obligation on the Government to maintain the level of services. The power to act is there; only the commitment and determination are needed to shore up this essential public service.

There are currently approximately 170 Post Office branches in Northern Ireland, employing around 4,500 people. Every employee of the Post Office not only provides a postal service for the citizens of the United Kingdom but fulfils a much greater social duty, especially in rural areas. Most post offices represent an integral part of local society, and they act as a focal point for many local communities. They act as a reassurance to many elderly citizens and are somewhere for people to meet and interact. In principle, they provide access to many services other than letters and parcels. That public service is currently being allowed to fade out and disappear in many areas.

Ever since Consignia took over the running of the Post Office, the company has never looked strong, and its operating costs increased by 500% to £100 million in the first six months to September last year, while losses at Parcelforce Worldwide were in the region of £200 million for the year 2001. The shocking reality is that the Post Office has, in the past, been a profitable business. In the past 10 years the Post Office made a profit of approximately £350 million every year, except for the last two.

Several factors, including the growth in e-mail, changes in competition rules and the freeze in stamp price, have contributed to the crisis. However, the company management must share a huge degree of the blame. It is estimated that the financial investment made by sub-postmasters across the country is around £1.5 billion, yet, even with that huge personal commitment, post offices are continuing to close on a weekly basis. The wage received by sub-postmasters is, in effect, the gross profit of their business — the transactions carried out on behalf of the Post Office, minus all their overheads such as salaries, rent, rates, electricity, et cetera. Over the past number of years the finance generated through the post office has either remained static or has decreased, while the cost of living and overheads have continued to increase. That has led to a question mark being placed over the viability of many post offices, and an ever-increasing number are no longer able to survive.

There is then the question of the support being given to the creation of the universal bank by the high street banking institutions. In mainland UK, all the banks have signed up, yet here in Northern Ireland only the Ulster Bank Ltd and the Northern Bank Ltd have signed up

— the First Trust Bank and the Bank of Ireland have not signed up.

Unfortunately, to date, all that the Post Office has witnessed has been a decline in business, with the loss of the Northern Ireland Electricity Powercard contract alone costing Northern Ireland sub-postmasters between 4% and 12% of their annual salaries.

If the Government genuinely value the services of the Post Office as currently provided, why do they appear to remain acquiescent to the continued closures of offices across the country? It appears that offices are being allowed to deteriorate and disappear, and many feel that it is in an effort to minimise compensation payouts.

In all of this, Tony Blair's Government appear very reluctant to act in order to protect this valuable service. The announcement from Consignia that 17% of its workforce is to be laid off has done nothing to provoke the Government into any kind of meaningful response. It only serves to reinforce the opinion that they are more than happy to watch the postal service crumble.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment does not have responsibility for this matter, so I have written to, and am awaiting a response from, Patricia Hewitt MP, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, on this urgent matter. I urge the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to use what influence he has to gain a satisfactory response from his Westminster counterpart.

If action is not taken promptly the situation looks predictably sure to deteriorate even further. We, as publicly elected representatives, have responsibility to those who put us here to do all in our power to maintain the levels and quality of the postal service in Northern Ireland.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am taking a different approach to this debate. While I agree with other Members, I want to look at this matter from the Committee for Social Development's perspective.

The National Federation of SubPostmasters wrote to the Committee on 11 September 2001 requesting a meeting to discuss the impact on local communities, both urban and rural, of the changes proposed by the Government and the Post Office. The federation identified three main areas of concern: the changes to the method of benefit payments; the network reinvention; and the treatment of the Six Counties as a region.

The Committee recognised the need to tread carefully in relation to improper interference in a commercial operation but saw merit in exploring the issue of changes to the method of benefit payments. The Committee was also mindful that the Post Office is a reserved matter, which falls within the responsibility of the Department of Trade and Industry. However, we agreed that it

would be useful to meet a delegation from the federation, and an invitation to attend a future meeting of the Committee was extended. Subsequently the federation said that it wished to consider developments in England, Scotland and Wales before appearing before the Social Development Committee. It also referred to changes in personnel in the regional offices as a further reason for postponing its appearance before the Committee. The latest indication from the federation suggests that it will not be in a position to appear before the Committee until the end of February at the earliest.

The Social Development Committee is aware that automated credit transfer will be the normal method of payment after 2003. The Department for Social Development has informed the Committee that, in keeping with a public commitment given by British Ministers, benefit recipients will be able, if they wish, to continue to collect their benefits in full, in cash, at post offices.

The network of post offices in the Six Counties provides services to rural and urban customers. The elderly, and people who rely on local services because they have poor or no access to public or private transport, make use of many of those services. According to the National Federation of SubPostmasters, about one third of our post offices provide services to rural communities. The Committee understands that the Minister for Social Development is committed to using existing methods of payments from post offices until March 2003. However, given that we are all singing from the one hymn sheet, and that we have all agreed with the context of the debate, I am disappointed that the Minister is not here to listen to the contributions of Members. He would have benefited greatly from it. Post offices, especially those in rural areas, provide invaluable services for local communities. While commercial viability cannot be ignored, neither can the fact that post offices provide an absolutely critical lifeline for rural areas where there may be no public transport or any other public services.

4.30 pm

In the light of the Social Development Committee's interest in ensuring the timely and accurate payment of benefits to those who are entitled to them, we look forward to hearing from the National Federation of SubPostmasters. I intend to ensure that nobody is disadvantaged, regardless of who they are or where they live. I hope that the Minister for Social Development will join me in ensuring that everything possible will be done to ensure that people have easy access and freedom of choice when cashing their benefits cheques. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mr Ford: I welcome the motion and congratulate John Dallat on highlighting the issue. He and other Members already mentioned some of the threats to urban and rural post offices. Principal among those is the change to benefits payments that is due in April

2003. I regret that although the issue was raised before in the Assembly, the Minister was unable to give any assurance that the system in Northern Ireland would be any different. I cannot remember which of the "hokey-cokey" DUP Ministers for Social Development was involved; in their eyes, devolution did not involve doing anything to protect post offices. It is a major concern for all of us.

The £100 million half-year loss by Consignia, the threat of cost-cutting by 15%, and Consignia's difficulties as a result of competition rules on cross-subsidy by Royal Mail, will create continuing problems for post offices in rural and urban areas, deprived or otherwise.

It was recently announced that An Post is expected to lose €30 million this year, having lost €7 million on a rather smaller scale of operation than Consignia had last year. The whole structure of traditional post offices, both counter services and deliveries, is under threat. Although deliveries are outside the scope of the debate, it is clear from the concerns raised by the Federation of Small Businesses today that many issues need to be addressed.

The post office in Crumlin serves a thriving and growing population of over 4,000. On an official visit to the village a couple of years ago, there were perceived threats to the viability of even an office of that size. Given that an office that serves a growing community of over 4,000 is under threat of closure, there is potential for closure in many other areas. It was suggested to me then that the borough of Antrim might end up with only one post office, in Antrim town centre. That would be unacceptable.

We need a much firmer response from the Government on how to develop services, and on how to promote measures to build on the Post Office's strengths, which Consignia, or its previous incarnation, have already highlighted over the past three to four years. On information points, I do not suggest that every sub-post office should be a full-ranging citizens' advice bureau, but branches now have the technology and the staff with the ability to deal with public bureaucracy and to provide related services. Such a public service would have to be funded; it could not be funded through the normal commercial activity of the Post Office.

As Iris Robinson said, there are problems with the concept of the universal bank. It has not yet developed as it should have done. On a personal note, however, I can recommend the co-operation between Post Offices Ltd and the Co-Operative Bank, which provides an excellent cheque-cashing service in this Building, for those of us who prefer not to queue to use plastic cards in the basement.

The start-up capital scheme is also being developed to ensure that post offices in rural areas are retained. I am not yet sure whether that scheme is applicable to

Northern Ireland, because it is administered through the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). DTI should be questioned about how it regards its responsibility for that reserved matter in a devolved region.

It is not just post offices in rural areas that will benefit from the start-up capital scheme. The role of the post office is as vital in many deprived urban areas as it is in rural areas. It provides a focus for a local community, and a centre to provide many services. Even if subsidies are being provided to assist the retention of offices in rural areas, there is a major threat to the urban network. These days, managers and decision-makers regard a distance of one or two miles as negligible, because they all drive cars.

Members all know — we have discussed them here often enough — of the inadequacies of public transport in many urban areas and the lack of car ownership among those who most need to use a post office. It is all very well saying that the average family has so many cars, but the level of car ownership is significantly lower for those who are living on benefits or retirement pensions. In my constituency of South Antrim the movement of an office in an area such as Carnmoney created major difficulties for a small number of clients. That was largely caused by the commercial difficulties of employing a new postmaster to take over the contract from a postmaster who was retiring.

There is no doubt that Consignia is being forced down a commercial road, which is very different from what we knew. However, the Government, and, at this stage, Westminster — though responsibilities may come to the Executive here — have duties to define and pay for matters of social obligation such as advice-giving and the payment of benefits.

I agree with Michelle Gildernew — there ought to be a Minister present to take note of the debate and to respond to it. The difficulty is that I am not sure which Minister should be here — perhaps several should be present. It is clearly a matter for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given its liaison with the Department of Trade and Industry, the parent Department in London. It is also a matter for the Department for Social Development, given the importance of the benefits element of post office work. I also suggest that it is a matter for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, given that it seems to be a matter for rural-proofing. However, there is no doubt that a Minister should be present to represent the Executive and take responsibility for any possible action and negotiation on behalf of Northern Ireland with Whitehall Departments.

There seems to be some evidence that the threat to the post office network in Northern Ireland is less than it is in some parts of GB. However, when a town as significant as Llandudno has just lost its town centre post office because of this problem, it is clear that we

are not talking about a threat that will easily be removed from Northern Ireland. The threat may be less in Northern Ireland than in GB, but it still exists, and the motion should be supported to highlight that.

Ms Morrice: The starting point for the debate — and something that we should never lose sight of — is the value of the service offered by post offices in rural and other areas. People have talked about the post office as the hub of the village and a meeting place for the elderly and the isolated. That makes our post offices important, and we must remember that. Rather than looking at their demise, we should ensure that the energy of the Government is put into finding ways in which their work can be developed and enhanced, as David Ford has said, to make the service better. Attempts have been made to introduce new areas of work, and people have gone into detail on that. That is highly commendable, but it must not be a paper exercise.

“The reinvention of the network”, as people are describing it, is to be welcomed, but only if its aim is to ensure that the excellent work carried out by post offices is secured, enhanced and not cut back. There is a commitment to ring-fence and protect offices in rural and disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland, and I welcome that. However, as Mr Dallat’s motion says, there must be a guarantee that that is going to happen. With regard to the enhancement of the service, the pilot scheme that is being carried out in Leicester and Rutland, which gives the public access to Government services such as car taxes, dog licences and child benefit through the post office, is tremendously valuable. It is not quite a citizens’ advice bureau, but it allows people to walk into their post offices and get access to such information. We are told that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is looking at the pilot scheme with interest, but we should go for more than interest — we should have a pilot scheme in Northern Ireland to prove that this would be very valuable for our post offices. The network-banking plan will be valuable in this, and it will allow the Post Office to become the retail outlet for banks. It is a superb new form of access to be welcomed.

In the face of the financial losses we have heard reported, the question is how can we make the service better; not how can we make it less costly? We must always remember that a post office is not a business; it is a service provider, particularly for the elderly, the lonely, the isolated or just those in need of advice. How can you measure financially the value of the 20 minutes a postmaster spends with a pensioner consoling him about the death of a loved one? This is something that is hugely valuable in the work of post offices, especially those in rural areas. It cannot be counted, and it can never be discounted.

We hear grand words from the Government about support for the socially disadvantaged, the marginalised,

the isolated and the elderly, about transparency, accessibility and open government. The local post office is surely the epitome of all these things. There is talk about the closure of post offices. They want to close them down if there is no longer a demand. I will take the opportunity to mention a case in my locality. For the past three and a half years, I have been banging on doors to no avail with petitions signed by hundreds of people in the locality of the Bloomfield shopping centre who want a new post office there. If someone at Consignia is listening to the debate, would they look at the possibility of opening a new post office there?

I am looking at the support being given to bring new sub-postmasters into the business. I am slightly confused, because I see that there is the new support for a sub-post office start-up capital subsidy scheme. Therefore I am thinking to myself that this is the scheme that postmasters in the North Down area should go for if they want to open a new post office. However, then I see that it is only for post offices that have been closed down and want to be reinstated. Is this the case? Conversely, is it possible that the people who are clamouring for a post office in my area could avail of this grant? My point is that perhaps it is worth looking at opening post offices in areas where there is a growing population, and recognising the value of that.

Mr Dallat mentioned talk about changing the service. The Federation of Small Businesses has warned of the danger of a change in the service to small businesses and of delaying delivery times to 3.00 pm. Small businesses need to get their post and cheques in the morning to determine operations for that day. Delaying the service until mid-afternoon will serve little valuable purpose.

Finally, Mr Beggs's point about greater assistance for security at post offices is something that Consignia must look at. The Post Office is, without doubt, the acceptable face of bureaucracy. Every single post office that is closed is a door closing in the face of our community.

Mrs Courtney: I support the motion, and I congratulate my Colleague, John Dallat, for bringing it to the Floor of the House.

Over the past year, the local and national press have highlighted the issue of post-office provision.

4.45 pm

What is the issue, and why has it been highlighted? The Post Office has been renamed Consignia, and perhaps people were not aware that it was their local post office which was being spoken about. Consignia has announced that it is making 30,000 staff redundant, which will affect postal workers and could lead to the loss of rural post offices. Post offices have been closing down at

the rate of 200 a year, and the trend is accelerating. For example, in 1999-2000, 382 post offices closed.

The Government policy of changing benefit payments from cash over the counter to bank transfer will deprive post offices of so much income that a large new wave of closures is certain, unless that income is replaced. The Social Security Agency intends that all benefits will be paid through a bank account in a conversion programme running from 2003 to 2005, known as automated credit transfers (ACT), and efficiency savings of £400 million per annum are expected. The Prime Minister has stated that everyone will have a bank account but that people who find bank accounts difficult to comprehend will still be able to withdraw cash at a post office. It is not clear how that will happen. It is clear, however, that if post offices do not generate funds from transactions, they will have to close.

There are two kinds of post office — Crown post offices run by the Post Office itself, and the 97% of post offices — the smaller sub-post offices — run under the franchise of Post Office Counters Ltd, a body which is separate from the Post Office.

The post office network is vital, serving 28 million people each week. The current plan is to establish a universal bank to provide Internet access, exploit e-commerce and take an enhanced role in providing Government services. The universal bank will, of course, only be possible if the major banks support it, which does not seem to be happening at the moment.

Independent sub-postmasters and postmistresses run the vast majority of rural post offices and are paid from £5,000 to £20,000 a year, depending on the size of the sub-post office and the population that it serves. That sum has to cover rental, wages and heat and light, and individuals may find it difficult to cope without other income.

Post offices are seen as intrinsic to local communities. Coming as I do from a small rural community in County Derry, I have first-hand knowledge of the benefits that a post office can bring. The post office in that rural community is still located in the village, and it is, and was, accessible to everyone. In the days when only well-to-do people had bank accounts, it was a lifeline for our local community. It was used to buy stamps, post parcels, buy postal orders, cash giro cheques and open Post Office accounts. It was also a place for social exchange, where the elderly could meet and gossip or just exchange pleasantries. On the other hand, banks were perceived as remote and unnecessary to people's daily lives. Usually banks were located in cities or larger towns, and transport was required. Even in this day and age, public transport for rural communities is extremely basic.

There is growing concern about the impending loss of further jobs, as it was recently announced that

Consignia had lost the contract to handle TV licensing services for the BBC. Some 1,500 jobs are to be transferred to Capita, the successful bidder, next July. Assurance from Consignia that rural post offices will be safeguarded is of little comfort, when we see that there is a recommendation to close 1,000 post offices immediately in England and Wales, with a further 5,000 to be closed over the next five years.

I want to reiterate what Mr Roy Beggs said. Robberies — especially in remote rural areas — are a growing trend. I mentioned my home village; its small post office was robbed for the first time in my lifetime about two months ago. The nearby post office in Ardmore was robbed twice recently, with the result that no one is willing to reopen it — obviously because of concerns about their personal safety.

I also have grave concerns when I see the statement from the Federation of Small Businesses about Consignia's plans to delay the delivery of services to small businesses until 3.00 pm. That will have a devastating effect on small business, particularly those that are run from home. According to Consignia, the plan will save it £1.2 billion a year through the prioritising of postal services. I am not sure that that is the correct way to safeguard a service such as the Post Office. I support the motion, and I ask the Assembly to take the necessary action to avoid closures and disadvantage to rural and urban areas.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. The Assembly debated this issue about a year or 18 months ago. We are even more concerned about the Post Office today, given that the forthcoming cuts could be more draconian than any previous cuts.

Post Office cuts are being introduced despite the problems faced by the workforce in the past year. When everything that has happened to the Post Office in recent weeks is considered, we can see the sort of thanks the staff get for putting up with death threats, letter bombs and the murder of one of their colleagues. The staff have been told that there will be cutbacks and redundancies to make savings of £1.26 billion each year.

Consignia's annual report on the Post Office states:

“We will only grow and flourish as a business with the support and commitment of our people.”

That commitment seems to go only one way; it is expected from staff, but is not returned by management. Postal workers have had to deal with people who are affected by the cutbacks, such as the elderly, the disabled and young mothers in rural communities.

According to Consignia's report, every day 28 million people visit one of 18,000 post offices throughout the United Kingdom. Most of those people live in rural areas. A rural area is defined as a habitation of less than 10,000 people, which defines most of Northern Ireland. In my constituency of Strangford, only a handful

of towns do not fall under that definition of rural area. In addition, the Strangford constituency has a proportionally larger population of pensioners. Those people will be affected greatly by the cutbacks that Consignia is trying to implement.

Consignia is trying to reduce the number of post offices by at least half. That will rip the heart out of many towns, villages and hamlets in the country. In most of the towns in the Strangford constituency, the post office is combined with the only grocery store. Post offices constitute the hub of society for those towns and villages. The pensioners can collect their pensions and buy essential goods in one shop. Consignia wants to computerise and digitalise its entire system, which will not work well for the elderly inhabitants of this country who do not want, or are apprehensive about, such a system.

In order to shut down many of the post offices, arrangements must be made for pensioners to receive their pensions. Consignia believes that everyone will be receptive to having payments made straight into their bank accounts by direct debit. Unfortunately, the focus groups have not informed Consignia that many senior citizens are suspicious of computerised systems and they do not like the thought of not being able to see their money, for which many have worked hard for over 40 years.

Consignia must have paid a fortune to a research company for their focus group results. However, those focus groups must not have told Consignia that for many elderly people pension day is a day out. Some people may not believe that, but it is true. Some elderly people are housebound, and the chance to go out to collect their pension means a great deal to them. It can be a chance to meet old friends and catch up on the gossip of the village or town. That is a lifeline for many pensioners. If it is taken away from them, they will be left stranded far from the main post offices, which could be in towns as far as 20 or 50 miles away.

For the same reasons young mothers will also be affected by the closure of rural post offices. Being isolated on a farm with young children sends some young mothers to the end of their tether. The weekly visit to the post office means that they can meet with other mothers in the same situation. The post office offers a rural network of support that is second to none. I cannot emphasise enough the support that a post office provides to everyone in a rural community.

Yesterday, ‘The Mail on Sunday’ revealed that Consignia wants to scrap the first post delivery in order to cut costs. The idea is to scrap the first post for those at residential addresses, who then must wait until three or four o'clock in the afternoon for their mail to be delivered. More than one million small businesses are run from residential addresses. They will be included among addresses that will have to wait until the

afternoon for mail. Most of that mail will be important to their survival. Other Members have touched on that. We all understand the problems for small businesses.

A Member of Parliament across the water has called for "Same value, same price, wherever you live". That is what the Post Office and Consignia should be delivering. However, it will be difficult to achieve. The announcement came hot on the heels of reports last month that Consignia is going to charge us all £50 a year to have our mail delivered before 9 o'clock. Is that an attempt to cover up the adverse reaction that arose over speculation about the impending fee to have mail delivered before a certain time of the day?

The second part of the announcement in yesterday's 'The Mail on Sunday' concerned two distinct mail delivery times. Does that mean that Consignia will reduce its staff to cut costs? Many believe that it is. If there are only two delivery times during the day, the same worker who did the morning route can do the same route in the afternoon, which eliminates the need for many postal workers in each area.

There were 2,000 redundancies during autumn 2001, and I believe that there are more to come. A document that Consignia has produced this year said that it is offering quality services, which represent value for money for both business customers and residential consumers. Does Consignia sound like a company that will deliver that? I think not, and residential and small business consumers will have something to say to the contrary about those new proposals.

Consignia aims to deliver 92.1% of its first-class mail the following day. However, it fails to do so. It manages to achieve 90% of its target. That may seem to be not too bad. However, Consignia handles 81 million items of post each day, so a lot of mail is not arriving by the next day. I sent a letter from my constituency office in Newtownards to Belfast that took 10 days to arrive. That delay was not due to the postal strike. I could have delivered it by hand more quickly.

Cutbacks are supposed to cut costs so that Consignia can make a profit. However, they have had an adverse effect on profits. Because there are fewer postal workers, the post arrives later and later each day. It is not the service that my constituents or I expect. Members will agree that to face more job losses when we have already had announcements from textile firms, and from Bombardier Shorts and their subcontractors in recent months is a blow that Northern Ireland cannot afford at this time. The last thing we need to hear of is job losses in an industry that has ever-increasing demands on its services. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and congratulate John Dallat for moving it. The issue has been discussed before in the Chamber and in council meetings. The

threat to post offices not only affects rural areas but deprived urban areas. With regard to post office access, people can be "rural" in a large town if services are inaccessible because of a lack of transport.

The acceleration of closures in recent years is what concerns people most. The speed at which services in rural areas are disappearing puts pressure on those areas. Benefits are affected. I have always asked people not to transfer their money into banks. It is ironic that the people who will now be most vulnerable are those who avoided having bank accounts and the ensuing charges. Bank accounts tend to bring with them various extra expenses that may seem small to those with reasonable incomes, but that are quite a weight on those who receive pensions and benefits. Every transaction is costly, especially when an account is overdrawn.

That would happen to people on low incomes, rather than to people on reasonable incomes.

5.00 pm

The issue is part of a Government policy change to move away from cash transactions to hi-tech facilities. Some 80% of Post Office income comes from benefit payments. There is a need for rural-proofing in areas such as Fermanagh and Tyrone on that, and other, issues. We want the Government Departments to do it, but there seems to be tremendous resistance. There must be rural-proofing if any sort of services are to remain. The issue has been debated on several occasions in the past few years by Fermanagh District Council, of which I am a member.

It is a powerful issue and one that is vital not only to the economics of rural areas, but to whether people want to remain, live or bring up a family in rural areas. The types of services, such as those offered by a post office, are vital in making that decision. That is as much part of the loss as the economic side of it.

We must ask how much money people will lose in making the transactions and whether public money will be saved. Will profits for banks increase? Are automated teller machines (ATM) all that accessible for those who are vulnerable? For example, old people find it difficult to use such machines, even when they are in town centres. There is a serious risk that the vulnerable may be robbed while using ATMs. That has not been considered. A weekly visit to a post office provides a much more friendly atmosphere for old people than a visit to a machine.

The cost of accessing cash in both rural areas and large towns is not always considered. People may have to spend some of their pensions on taxis or buses in order to access their cash. Taxis are the usual form of transport. They can cost a considerable amount, which represents a real cut in people's pensions or benefits. The savings made by Consignia will have a tremendous

social impact on both rural and deprived urban communities. Therefore, we do not wish to move in that direction, because those communities will be damaged considerably.

The decline in services is compounded by the fact that the provision of many other services, such as banking, is declining and, in some cases, is no longer available — in rural towns and the deprived neighbourhoods of built-up areas, for example. Banks are moving to locations where the most across-the-counter transactions are made. ATMs are put in rural areas as an excuse to remove local branches of banking. A situation could arise in the near future in which people in rural villages have no access to ATMs, banks or post offices. That would result in further travel. That is an environmental consideration for many people and for the relevant Government Department.

As I said, a cut in the number of post offices amounts to a cut in benefits and pensions. ATMs are not considered to be user-friendly. In the South, a debate arose over the Bank of Ireland's decision to refuse across-the-counter exchanges of money. Older and more vulnerable people in the community instigated that debate.

Given the intensity of that debate, people in similar situations here will face the same difficulties. Although those difficulties may be outside their control, Assembly Ministers should consider them. The Government has pushed it to this point, and those Ministers will have a considerable say in the matter.

Consignia has had problems. It was in profit in 1999, but has made losses since then at unsustainable levels. Its core business has been neither developed nor enhanced, but attacked by the developments mentioned by previous contributors to the debate.

It has been mentioned already that Consignia should be a service provider and not a business. Management failures, staff relations and commitment to customer service have been cause for comment. Some 85% of people in rural areas live one mile from a post office; 99% less than three miles from one. That will change in the near future when those post offices are lost because they are no longer considered profitable. The problem arises when a service provider is privatised and becomes a profitable business. The original intention was that the Post Office should provide a service for all areas, wealthy or otherwise. Changes have destroyed that intention, and we do not want that.

Various management consultants have mentioned several matters. A code of practice has been requested to deal with prospective closures and any area reviews proposed by the Post Office. With regard to initiatives, the main issue is increasing pressure to form as a commercial organisation and not as a service. Opportunities and threats from technology and alternative service providers are another.

Transaction-based services, such as universal banking and ticket sales, are most likely to enhance incomes in post offices in which benefit payment transactions make up a significant proportion of turnover. That would be especially important in rural and deprived urban areas with limited commercial business opportunities.

Attracting new people to the post office is another difficulty to be faced, and that will become more difficult as time goes on.

The issue has already been discussed in the Assembly, and I want to see Ministers and Departments take all possible steps to address it. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Neill: I support the motion. I pay tribute to John Dallat, not only for this very good motion, but for introducing the previous one on the subject and for leading this campaign. He has captured the mood of the Assembly in a very nice way, and he has much support across the Chamber in respect of the value of service.

The trend since Thatcherism has been to introduce competition, business-style approaches and a business ethos into everything. There must be a ledger under which things are valued. What has happened to the sense of public service? Where has it gone? The change is apparent not just with the postal services but in many different walks of life, and in many of our Departments. It is a recurring theme; we concentrate on a line in a ledger, with no mention of public service.

Is it any wonder? If we construct our approach to how we organise our services on a business basis, a reduction in service will inevitably follow. Unprofitable businesses will be closed; that is business ethos.

We Members can be hypocritical. On the one hand, there is a considerable degree of support for the business ledger approach. On the other hand, there is weeping and gnashing of teeth about the diminution of service. Our approach must be more consistent. We must re-examine the value of public service; what it meant in its true ethos and what it meant for the people in the community for whom reliable service is a priority.

The need for post offices has been well highlighted. Coming from a rural constituency, I see it daily in my office. Many people who come to the office, with either social security or pension problems, do not have a bank account. They depend on their local post office.

Members referred to the fact that, if a local post office were to close, people who need that service must travel elsewhere to avail themselves of it. That results in an additional expense for those people. The cheapest taxi fare in my area is £3. People must pay £3 to go into town and £3 to travel home — a total cost of £6. The old-age pension is about £62. A £6 taxi fare amounts to almost 10% of that. As they do not have a local post

office, those people must pay almost 10% of their pension each week to have it cashed.

Do not tell me about that other service — public transport. Where is its ledger line? Where has the public transport service gone? It does not exist in most rural areas. Therefore, the only mode of transport available is a taxi. That is what we are forcing on some old-age pensioners; that is the situation that we are creating for them.

When we heard that the Westminster Government were looking at the introduction of automation and other services for post offices, many of us thought that that was the solution and the saviour. We thought that it might actually work; post offices in rural areas might get banking services. It is a good idea, but, if it means a reduction in the number of rural post offices, it must be resisted.

Gerry McHugh mentioned the trend in rural banks. My local branch of the First Trust Bank closed some months ago. I admit that it was robbed twice, which was the reason given for its closure. However, although Northern Ireland may experience a great deal of trouble — indeed, we debated law and order issues earlier — I contest that cities in, for example, Italy can put up with some of the worst levels of bank robbery. Public service is the victim again.

Automation is the goal. However, not simply automation of any kind — online banking is the aim. Computer access is essential to the receipt of online services. Where are we going with that?

5.15 pm

Consignia has come in for some criticism in the Chamber, some of which may be justified. In the townland of Ballyward, the post office closed down, and I know the lengths to which Consignia went to find a replacement sub-postmaster. That is one of the aspects that we have been talking about — the area really needed the service. I appreciate the efforts that Consignia made.

More importantly, we should be advocating the use of those services to our communities. If the services are not used they will not survive. In some cases, more use could have been made of the rural post office in order to keep it viable. We should highlight to our communities that they will lose those services unless they use them.

One difficulty in speaking this late in the debate is that others have already dealt with most of the main issues at length. However, I shall emphasise the social side of post offices again. Society in Northern Ireland is unique — we like to meet as a community. In a rural area, the post office, like the primary school, is a linchpin for the community. The value of the service is incalculable. We should continue to highlight that aspect of post office services. I hope that, in doing so, we can make

people realise what they are losing and thus prevent the closure of rural post offices.

Mr Dallat: The debate has provoked a great deal of interest, and I hope, an awareness of the changes in the way that postal services are being delivered. I hope that Members' contributions will be taken seriously and will not be ignored by Consignia or by the Government. I am delighted that members of Consignia are present to listen to the debate, and I hope that they will return to the company and report on our genuine contributions.

Roy Beggs spoke of the vagueness of Consignia's plans and the lack of information. He is absolutely correct. He also pointed out that the closure of post offices is speeding up and that that is a cause for increasing concern. Iris Robinson reminded us that closures, if and when they happen, will affect every town and village. She also called for information. Michelle Gildernew informed us that the National Federation of SubPostmasters will appear before the Committee for Social Development, and I welcome that. She mentioned that payments can still be made at the post office, but it is a known fact that the commission earned under the new payment method will be only a fraction of that earned under the current one.

David Ford pointed out that Consignia is being forced down a particular road as a result of a European Directive that is true. Jane Morrice called for the development and enhancement of services, and the need to ring-fence the future of rural post offices. However, once the Post Office comes under private ownership, it is difficult to see how Government pledges will hold. Annie Courtney told us of the plight of some post offices that have been raided. Jim Shannon spent some time speaking about the plight of postal workers. In recent times, we know the price that they have paid for providing the service. Gerry McHugh spoke about the acceleration of closures. He said that closures created pressure on people to open bank accounts, which introduces the matter of bank charges. Those in rural areas may need to get taxis in order to collect their money.

Éamonn O'Neill spoke of the need to re-examine the value of public service. I could not agree more. We all agree with his suggestion that the public use the post offices whenever possible to ensure that we get the message across that post offices, especially sub-post offices, are a valuable part of the community.

Of course, the changes that were spoken about today cannot be stopped, but we can direct the transition in a way that will enhance the Post Office, rather than destroy it. We cannot ignore what is happening, nor can we allow it to create further equality in a world that is already far from perfect. There is every reason to directly assist the development of postal services, given that it is right and proper to target social need. That is the Govern-

ment's function, which they exercise for public transport and many other essential services.

The Government must be regularly reminded that there are steps beyond which they should not sell off public services to the private sector. If they do, they have ceased to govern, and there is real concern that the closure of sub-post offices will not end the run-down of postal services. There is genuine worry that the quality of service will continue to deteriorate, which will eventually lead to differential costs of mail delivery in rural areas. Therefore, if we are to protect the needs of the people that we represent, there is a fundamental need for hands-on monitoring of postal services. We are fortunate that we have our own Assembly, and we have every right to ask questions about the basic infrastructure that affects our constituents. The Minister was criticised for not being present, but I understand that his absence was unavoidable. However, we cannot leave it at that; we must pursue our concerns through action. There

must be direct interaction between Consignia and various Assembly Departments, because it is only through partnership that we can hope to save our post offices in this period of uncertainty.

I remind Members that one of the first actions carried out in the Building was to open a post office for our convenience. Let us redouble our efforts to ensure that what we know to be good for ourselves continues to be available for others.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes proposals by Consignia to cut the number of post offices in Britain by half and calls for immediate action to protect the infrastructure of post offices in Northern Ireland, particularly those serving people in rural and disadvantaged urban areas.

Adjourned at 5.23 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 4 February 2002

*The Assembly met at noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).
Members observed two minutes' silence.*

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: During the debate on the breakdown of law and order on Monday 28 January, allegations were made against Mr Gerry McHugh. Mr McHugh requested and has been granted an opportunity to reply to those allegations. I remind Members that the matter is not open for debate.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Following serious allegations by Mr Norman Boyd, the Member for South Antrim, in the Assembly last Monday, I wish to make a personal statement.

I place on record that at no time have I ever been charged or convicted of the murder of anyone, let alone a postal worker. Mr Boyd's comments were without foundation, and his allegations have no connection with any material fact, nor any connection with reality. I want to make it clear that the allegations made by Mr Boyd are completely untrue. In a climate in which postal workers have been targeted by Loyalists, and in which Loyalists attack Nationalist communities daily, Mr Boyd's remarks are thoughtless and stupid.

Members are no doubt aware of the issue of felon-setting and, in particular, the comments made in Westminster by Douglas Hogg shortly before the Loyalist murder of human rights lawyer Patrick Finucane. In that context, we need to recognise that Mr Boyd's comments are also very dangerous. Given the seriousness of those clearly false accusations, I ask the Speaker what further measures he intends to take against Mr Boyd. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: It is the convention in such circumstances to ask the Member involved whether he accepts the statement and withdraws his remarks.

Mr Boyd: I withdraw my comments on the matter.

Mr Speaker: I must comment on this incident. In the past I have warned Members repeatedly to take more care about what they say in the Chamber. Indeed, at the start of the debate in question, I warned Members about what they would say. Why do some Members

choose to ignore the advice of the Chair? Erskine May, page 386 in the current edition, makes it clear that

“good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language”.

In this case, a Member made a profoundly serious accusation without checking the facts. That is irresponsible. Why should Members make such accusations at all? The inevitable consequence of such accusations or certain other remarks must be to place the Member accused — in this case utterly wrongly accused — and his family in danger. If that is the intent of such comments, it is a criminal intent. No Member should use the cover of the privileges offered in the House to fulfil such intent. If that is not the intent, what is it other than to bolster an argument that is either weak in its content or weak in its delivery?

I call on Members again to be more careful about what they say, not just in respect of grave allegations of this kind, but also in respect of other comments that are made. I trust that from this sorry incident, all Members of the House will draw a line from which they will hold back, and that the whole House will draw a lesson to which it will adhere.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Suspension of Standing Orders

Motion made:

That Standing Orders 10(2) and 10(6) be suspended for Monday 4 February 2002. — [*The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.*]

Ms Morrice: I oppose the motion, which will allow the Assembly to sit this evening. We fought hard to ensure that the Assembly would adopt a modern, family-friendly approach to its proceedings. It was agreed that sittings would end at 6.00 pm on a Monday, and that should be respected.

Exceptions can be made in exceptional circumstances or where there is a tremendous backlog of work. However, that is not the case today. Why should debate on a major policy matter such as the regional transportation strategy be squeezed into an evening sitting rather than take place tomorrow?

There does not appear to be enough business for the Assembly to conduct because of a sad lack of legislation coming forward. The Executive, the Committees and private Members should bring forward legislation, as we did for the children's commissioner, so that sittings will last for two full days in the future.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The decision to suspend Standing Orders was taken by a substantial majority of the Business Committee, and in those circumstances I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) and 10(6) be suspended for Monday 4 February 2002.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Trade and Business Development

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that he wishes to make a statement on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in its trade and business development sectoral format, which was held in Limerick on Wednesday 23 January 2002.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The sixth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in its trade and business development sectoral format took place at the Castletroy Park Hotel. Ms Carmel Hanna and I represented the Northern Ireland Administration. The Irish Government were represented by Ms Mary Harney TD, Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment. Ms Hanna has approved the report, which is also made on her behalf.

The Council received a verbal report from InterTrade-Ireland's chief executive, Liam Nellis, on the body's recent achievements and the key activities in which it will be engaged in 2002. Those included progress on such initiatives as the reconciliation of trade statistics, the publication of discussion documents on all-island competitiveness, support for microbusinesses operating in the border region, the development of InterTradeIreland's networks and the linking of businesses through high-profile events including the enterprise forum last November, a forthcoming equity network conference and the 2002 agency forum.

In September 2001 the Council approved InterTrade-Ireland's corporate plan for 2002-04, which outlined the body's strategic goals for that period. At its meeting, the Council considered and approved InterTradeIreland's operating plan for 2002, which sets out the proposed activities of the body through which the corporate plan will be implemented during the current year. The main activities outlined in the operating plan include research, information and communications technology, e-commerce, the promotion of cross-border institutional and business alliances, the development of an all-island business model, knowledge transfer and the promotion of private equity.

The Council considered and approved InterTrade-Ireland's proposals for the introduction and operation of a financial assistance scheme. The scheme sets down the general principles and arrangements that would apply to the assessment, monitoring and evaluation of assisted projects.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair)

The Council discussed an interim position paper on public procurement, which was commissioned by

InterTradeIreland. The paper identifies an opportunity for greater co-operation and the sharing of information between the two Administrations on procurement issues, including supplier linkages, tendering and supplier databases, e-procurement and the procurement excellence model. There was a useful exchange of views on the issues raised in the consultation paper. The Council noted the paper's key findings and asked to see the InterTradeIreland proposals that resulted from the findings and recommendations of the final report.

The Council agreed to meet again in the same sectoral format in Northern Ireland in April 2002.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for his report, which contains many interesting initiatives to promote commerce, industry and, I hope, tourism in the whole island of Ireland. Does the Minister intend — now and for the next North/South Ministerial Council meeting — to assess the consequences on trade and commerce in Northern Ireland resulting from the introduction of the euro in the Republic of Ireland on 1 January, and its potential impact on inward investment here?

I hope that the Minister will agree that the currency differential could have a serious, perhaps adverse, impact in Northern Ireland, particularly in the border regions. It is important that an urgent assessment of that impact be made. In doing so, will the Minister consider the suggestions — I will not go into those now — in respect of pilot schemes that might soften the blow and improve people's experience of the dual currencies that exist already in most border regions?

12.15 pm

Ms Morrice: Hear, hear.

Sir Reg Empey: Why am I not surprised by the "Hear, hear", Mr Deputy Speaker?

That was not discussed at the meeting. Indeed, the Member will be aware that the operational and corporate plans of the Trade and Business Development Body do not contain a requirement for that body to discuss the euro specifically. However, they do address matters that are relevant to competitiveness. The Member will also be aware that my Department sponsors the Northern Ireland euro preparations forum, which did a sterling job trying to prepare our businesses for the introduction of the euro in January. That work will continue at departmental level.

The Member will know that we are used to working in a dual currency environment. The euro does have a significance that is different, in so far as it is a pan-national currency that deals with a growing amount of trade. The bulk of our trade with Europe is in the euro zone. I am happy to take on board the Member's comments and, even if it is not appropriate for the North/South Trade and Business Development Body to deal with it, there is no reason for its not being dealt with at

departmental level or between the respective Departments, North and South. I am sure the House will hear more about the euro and how Northern Ireland's industry reacts to it.

Lord Kilclooney: I was interested in Mr McGrady's comments. Does the Minister agree that the introduction of the euro in the Republic of Ireland is of some significance to Northern Ireland, and does he agree that anyone who invests tries to invest wisely, does not invest in a territory where the value of the currency is collapsing, but prefers an area where the currency is strong? Any businessman using his head would not invest in a territory where the euro was collapsing. Does the Minister agree that the euro is at its lowest level for six months, and does he realise that people in Northern Ireland, who had punts in the Republic of Ireland, are now returning those funds to Northern Ireland and the safety of the pound sterling?

Sir Reg Empey: I am grateful for the Member's comments.

My view remains that the euro is undervalued, not that sterling is overvalued. The last few years of stability between our currency and the American dollar has facilitated substantial growth in exports to North America and significant investment from North America. The problem was to do with the way in which the euro was introduced. At the very outset countries were admitted into the euro whose economies had not converged sufficiently, and this fudging of the issues, in an attempt to get the statistics to align, created the view that the euro was dominated more by political considerations than by economic ones. Consequently, we have been left with a huge mountain of between 25% and 30% differential to trade into the euro zone, and that is extremely difficult for exporters. However, it is useful in cases where people can buy in the euro zone and sell in the dollar zone. Some people do that and hedge their currencies.

The problem is that we are trying to squeeze economies into the single currency that have not converged and that need different interest rates to control their levels of activities. The Republic needs a higher interest rate, and countries such as Germany need a lower interest rate.

That fundamental conflict is the cause of the instability. It is still my view that it is the euro that is undervalued, and not sterling that is overvalued. I suspect that until such time as the markets believe that the driving force is economic and not political, some of that instability will remain.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement on the issues of all-island competitiveness, the operating plan for research, information and communications technology and e-commerce. Can the Minister tell us what further work can be done to allow more equal competitiveness and

advantage to all areas in the light of the lack of broadband facilities in places such as Fermanagh and Derry?

Sir Reg Empey: I hope, with the Speaker's permission, to make a statement on broadband to the Assembly, in which all those issues will be addressed, later this month. It is clear from several debates in the House, and from questions I have been asked, that there is great interest in broadband, particularly in the west. We have quite a lot to say about it; actions are already in train. I have had meetings with the Ministers in the Department of Trade and Industry in London, who have responsibility for the issue, and there are a number of matters that I wish to draw to the attention of the House. If the Member will allow, I will not go into greater detail at this time.

With regard to issues that might generate further economic activity, I draw the attention of the Member to the matter of procurement. Government purchases in Northern Ireland amount to approximately £1.6 billion. In the Republic, they are in the region of £4 billion or £5 billion. Remarkably little purchasing occurs between jurisdictions. Some people from here are able to get into the procurement circuit in the Republic and vice versa, but we believe it could be far more substantial. That would have the benefit of import substitution. There may be companies capable of supplying both jurisdictions that are currently not taking advantage of that situation, partly because they do not have knowledge or understanding of the different procurement regimes. InterTradeIreland is working hard to generate further activity in that area. We believe that that will result in the creation of jobs.

Mr Shannon: The DUP believes that practical co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is in the best interests of our constituents and the people of Northern Ireland. With that in mind, what sectoral business interests are involved in the cross-border institutional and business alliance? Will the cost of promotion be borne or shared by those businesses, and if so, to what percentage?

Sir Reg Empey: I am not sure that I heard every point that the Member made. InterTradeIreland will initially promote some of that activity, but it is the belief of that organisation that, ultimately, the private sector should take on the responsibility. What is required is a start, and for someone to set the tone. It can be done jointly. It does not all have to be done by InterTradeIreland or by the private sector. Ultimately we want it to be done by the private sector, because that would relieve InterTradeIreland of the associated costs.

There has been a history of poor communication between business organisations, with the possible exception of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Irish Business Employers Confederation (IBEC), which

have been co-operating for some years. There are other areas of activity that are virtually blank.

I have just referred to public procurement in each jurisdiction, and remarkably little attention has been paid to that. We discussed at the meeting the need to take the initiative with the clear intention of the private sector's playing an increasing role in shouldering the burden of the costs.

Ms Morrice: I would like to bring the subject back to the euro, which will be a surprise. Forgive me if I misheard the Minister, but I think he said that it was inappropriate for the body to deal with single currency and the euro. I would like to understand that better. This body discusses trade and InterTradeIreland, and the euro is vital to that. The Minister said that there is a differential of between 25% and 30% when exporting into the euro zone, which is the Republic of Ireland. What is being done to help small businesses to overcome that barrier? What is being done to encourage the hospitality industry to use the euro and to allow tourists to use the euro north of the border? I have many other questions, but I will confine myself to two.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member partly misheard what I said. In the operating and corporate plans of InterTradeIreland no specific mention is made of the euro, but my Department has specific responsibilities for the euro preparations forum. However, I went on to say that there could be a role for competitiveness. I made that point clear to the Member for South Down, Mr McGrady.

We are a regional Administration in the United Kingdom, and we do not have responsibility for these fiscal matters, so we have to deal with the situation as it is. When there is a currency differential which varies between 20% and 30%, we do a number of things. First, the Department's business excellence service, which is incorporated in the IDB, carries out an enormous amount of work to improve the competitiveness of our companies, large and small. We offer a wide range of advice. We have had "meet-the-buyer" and a range of other events to encourage companies to be as competitive as possible. However, the fact remains that if one trades in a different currency zone, one is at the mercy of the markets and of what people believe to be the value of the respective currencies. However, that is only one side of the coin.

In my reply to the right hon Member for Strangford, Lord Kilclooney, I referred to other companies that can use the strong sterling to purchase in the euro zone and resell in the dollar zone, which is our largest export market. Those people can make an additional margin out of that type of activity. If one purchases in sterling and sells in euros, one is at a particular disadvantage. I do not dismiss or underestimate the difficulties that have arisen, but I have to stress that it is not a straightforward, simple matter.

In the long term, one has to work out how to control the economies of different nations that have not converged. Those economies can have different rates of growth. One single interest rate is applied to all when it is clearly unsuitable for some — and that is the dilemma. No one has provided an answer to that question, and that is why, in my opinion, the markets are undervaluing the euro. A single currency works only in economies that have converged and are on a similar cycle. When economies peak and trough at totally different times and grow at different rates, attempts are made to squeeze everything into one pot, and it does not fit. Until that is resolved, there will continue to be an undervalued euro.

Mr Hussey: I listened with interest to Mr McHugh's question on broadband infrastructure.

I want to remind the Minister that between the constituencies of Fermanagh and South Tyrone and Foyle there is another constituency called West Tyrone. However, that is not the essence of my question.

The Minister will not be surprised that I ask him to elaborate on the section in his statement that mentions support for microbusinesses in the border region.

12.30 pm

Sir Reg Empey: The hon Member is a member of what I call "team West Tyrone" — I will never be permitted to forget that that constituency exists between Fermanagh and South Tyrone and others. The Member has, on a number of occasions at Question Time and by other means, raised the matter of broadband infrastructure. As I said to Mr McHugh, I hope to be able to make a comprehensive statement on that at a later stage.

With regard to microbusinesses, InterTradeIreland will have a grant-giving capacity to support projects that are outside the remit of our existing agencies. Its remit will deal with assisting businesses that are straddling the border, where a small amount of resources could help. At present, such companies fall between the existing agencies of both Administrations. We will take extra care to ensure that there is no duplication, and it is not anticipated that we are talking about large amounts of money.

In some cases we have businesses that are literally on two different fields, and there are particular problems that go with that. Bearing in mind the problems that have arisen over the past 30 years, it is our view that in those areas the natural development that one would have expected was prevented by terrorism, threats, roads being closed and areas being artificially cut off, which would not otherwise have happened. We felt that it was appropriate to recognise those facts and recognise that, in those rural areas, it has not been possible to attract large multinational investments or significant locally based investments. However, there are people, particularly in the border counties, who have the

desire and determination to engage in business, and we want to recognise the particular problems that they face. For that reason, we hope to provide this scheme to allow microbusinesses to grow, develop and provide much needed employment in those areas.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's statement and would like to follow up his encouragement for public procurement in both parts of the island. Am I to believe that this now presents a new and exciting opportunity for small and medium-sized businesses to tender for Government contracts on an all-Ireland basis? Can the Minister assure us that the procedures will be open and transparent with input from the public audit offices both here in Belfast and in Dublin?

Sir Reg Empey: The procurement policies of this Administration and of the Irish Government remain our own and theirs respectively. The point that I am trying to make is that we have recognised that there is a huge pool of procurement year in, year out. We are wrestling with the problem of defining and agreeing what the real level of trade is between the North and the South, and I can assure the Member that it is not a simple exercise and that a great deal of work is being done on that.

A comparatively small amount of procurement is going North/South, and if you add the two together you get a pool of between £6 billion and £7 billion of trade. That has the potential to grow and allow local companies to participate in it. As that is already there, we should encourage and prepare companies to take advantage of it.

There is the matter of awareness and of drawing the possibilities to the attention of small companies. They may not be aware of those possibilities, nor understand the procurement policies and procedures in the other jurisdiction. That is an educational issue, and those companies require "meet-the-buyer" events; assistance to help them get onto select lists; and help to understand the tendering procedures. The 'European Journal' will still apply, but the procedures set down by the Audit Office are not affected. We are engaged in an endeavour to involve companies that do not conduct, or go after, any business in another jurisdiction. There are also those companies that do go after the business but have difficulty in managing the substantial differences in the procedures on both sides of the border. There is potential in both jurisdictions for more of the existing companies to get a slice of the business. Some have been successful in winning contracts in construction, for example. Minimal cost is involved in initiating this endeavour, but it is an educational process. It has great potential.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I return to the issue of procurement policy, which is, as the Minister pointed out, a matter for each jurisdiction to decide upon. I am not sure whether the

Southern figures that he gave were in euros or punts, but there is a substantial amount of money in the public procurement purse. Can he assure us that some cognisance of targeting social need (TSN) policies will be taken in the position paper, so that in the area of public procurement, and in InterTradeIreland's scheme of financial assistance, TSN attitudes, ideas and policies can be used to target that substantial public money into needy areas on both sides of the border? Such areas have suffered from neglect over decades from state agencies that had responsibility for creating employment in those areas. When public money is available for procurement it should be used to target those areas that most need financial assistance and which need business directed towards them and business promoted and nurtured within them.

Sir Reg Empey: I can advise the Member of the precise arithmetic, but we are talking about a substantial number of billions of pounds' worth of business annually. InterTradeIreland has published its TSN action plan, which is subject to approval by the North/South Ministerial Council, and it has made its absolute commitment clear. If you look at the type of companies targeted, and the geographical areas in which we are developing businesses, you will see that they are nearly all in TSN areas. Our endeavours in relation to procurement could, of course, apply to any company in Northern Ireland, whether it is in a TSN area or not.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Currently, companies lack knowledge of the potential — some feel unable to take on the responsibility, as they do not have the procedural knowledge in different jurisdictions, and some may lack tendering capabilities. We believe that we can assist those companies, draw their attention to the potential and help them with the procedures. They may require technical and professional assistance. Purchasing organisations on both sides of the border have a responsibility to ensure that details of what they are doing are disseminated widely, so that even a small company in a remote rural area is, as much as possible, on a level playing field.

There is huge potential in this area — it is money that has already been spent, and a large proportion of it is in importing. Import substitution, which would have a positive impact on the balance of payments, could therefore take place here. We could make progress on a range of issues. The key issue is that many companies, especially small ones, do not recognise the potential that exists. InterTradeIreland will have the task of getting that message across to companies. It has set that as a target, therefore it must show how it intends to deliver in that respect.

We are also trying to establish accurately the baseline for current levels of purchasing on both sides of the border, so that we can measure any improvements.

Mr O'Neill: How will the development of an all-Ireland business model, the transfer of knowledge and the promotion of private equity benefit small businesses, in particular, in their quests to access venture capital? Will there be opportunities for businesses to improve in those circumstances? What does the Minister hope will emerge from those initiatives?

Sir Reg Empey: Since its inception, the Trade and Business Development Body has been tasked with examining equity capital and its availability. Work has been carried out on that. A major study by chartered accountants, which was published some months ago, indicated that, by and large, money was available at a reasonable cost. However, it also identified certain gaps in the market. There is a huge cultural problem in Northern Ireland in that people are less willing to contemplate venture capital involvement.

The Republic is ahead of us in that respect, because it has had some success, but Northern Ireland still has some way to go. The problem in the past was that venture capital tended to be available for the big boys only. However, sums of money that are within the scope of many small businesses are now available.

A business model for the island would allow us to benchmark our position and to analyse the likely impact of certain economic decisions on businesses. In that way we could identify what we must do, target resources to the businesses that need them most and identify areas of weakness where resources could be concentrated. In that sense, it is a benchmarking exercise.

The debate on venture capital and equity must continue, because there is a cultural problem. Venture capital drives much of the American economy, and it has done so for many years. However, there is resistance to venture capital here. People do not want to give up a slice of their companies. Venture capitalists can provide money to a company at a much greater risk than would a commercial bank. Understandably, they demand a percentage of the equity in the company for that service.

In North America that system has driven business, created new jobs and wealth, and encouraged the creation of new businesses. The big weakness in Northern Ireland is that our business start-up rate is lower than that of our counterparts in these islands. Anything that encourages the acceptability of venture capital and its use is therefore likely to have a positive impact throughout the economy.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (BEST VALUE) BILL

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I trust that Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of Amendments detailing the order for consideration and the amendments that I have grouped for debate in my provisional list. Members will note from the Marshalled List that the Committee for the Environment intends to oppose certain clauses of the Bill. That has been noted in the provisional grouping.

I propose two groups of amendments, which will be debated in turn. The first group consists of amendments 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6, and also the Committee's opposition to clauses 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7. Members who wish to speak on any of those issues should speak during the first debate, albeit that the votes on each of them will come at the normal place. The second group consists solely of amendment 2, which is the new clause being proposed by the Minister.

If that is clear, we will proceed.

12.45 pm

Clause 1 (The duty of best value)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): I beg to move amendment No 1: In clause 1, page 1, line 13, leave out subsections (3) to (5).

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 3: In clause 8, page 5, line 16, leave out from beginning to end of line 17. — [Mr Foster.]

No 4: In clause 8, page 5, line 18, leave out "principal Act" and insert "Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 (c. 9)". — [Mr Foster.]

No 5: In clause 9, page 5, line 21, leave out subsection (1). — [The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea).]

No 6: In the long title, leave out from "imposing" to "effectiveness" and insert

"placing on district councils a general duty to make arrangements for continuous improvement in the way in which their functions are exercised". — [Mr Foster.]

Before I speak on the group of amendments, I want to remind Members of the purpose of the Bill, and to explain the background to the amendments I am now commending to the Assembly. My objective has been to create best value arrangements that will deliver transparency, accountability and value for money in the use of council resources and in the provision of local services to council residents and ratepayers. It is, therefore, a Bill for local people.

Another important aspect of the Bill is the repeal of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) of specified council services. As I said during an earlier debate, few Members will mourn the passing of CCT. I was one of its main opponents in my days as a local councillor. Best value is a much better process. Emphasis is placed on quality and level of service, rather than measured in cost terms alone.

It would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity to acknowledge the full and detailed consideration given by the Committee to my proposals. I do not deny that the Committee received significant reservations in evidence from local councils and other interested parties. However, as the debate unfolds it will become clear to Members that I have listened and reacted to those concerns. Throughout the consultation process I have taken account of constructive comments, and I have sought to introduce a best value process that best reflects the specific requirements and circumstances of local government in Northern Ireland.

The reduction of the Bill from 19 clauses to 11 recognises what is best for local government in Northern Ireland, and is balanced with the rights of local residents, ratepayers and users of local council services. Since 1998, district councils have been fully engaged in best value development through four joint working groups and a steering group. The working groups, each chaired by a council chief executive, were responsible for developing guidance, performance indicators, customer surveys, and so on. I am fully committed to that partnership approach to best value. I will ensure that it continues in the interest of all who are engaged in its implementation. I hope that the above demonstrates that neither the Department of the Environment nor I can be accused of "going it alone" on best value development, or of trying to rush through statutory provisions without taking into account the views and representations of consultees.

Concerns were expressed that a best value statutory framework was being advanced at a time when several reviews of best value were being undertaken in England and Wales. Departmental officials and I were mindful of those developments. My colleagues in GB assured me that none of those reviews would change the principles and broad framework of best value as contained in GB best value legislation. However, some of the detailed implementation requirements may change. My officials and I are monitoring that carefully in the interest of developing best value guidance for councils in Northern Ireland.

It has also been suggested that progress on best value statutory provisions should await developments in the review of public administration. No one knows what will emerge from that review. My firm opinion is that best value, as a process, can be applied regardless of the structures and responsibilities of local government.

Before addressing each amendment, I want to look to the future. I welcome the Committee for the Environment's endorsement of best value as a process that is aimed at the interests of local people. I also welcome the Chairperson's assurance that the Committee does not oppose a statutory framework for its implementation. In the future I will consider, with ministerial Colleagues and the Committee, the establishment of a full statutory framework. We will be informed in that by reviewing council performance under the voluntary arrangements and will take into account the outcome of the review of best value in Great Britain. Progress on the review of public administration will also be considered, as will developments arising from the procurement review.

I will now turn to the amendments. In my introductory remarks, I outlined my strong belief that best value is, first and foremost, for the benefit of local residents, ratepayers and users of council services. I welcome the Committee for the Environment's endorsement of the best value principles of transparency, accountability and value for money. I assume that all Members support those key objectives for local council services. I am pleased that the Committee recognises the importance of placing a statutory duty on councils to deliver best value in consultation with local people. Such a duty exists in England and Wales, and will soon be introduced in Scotland. It would be a disservice to Northern Ireland citizens if the Assembly denied them the same rights that are being afforded to all other citizens in the United Kingdom.

Members know that I would have preferred to establish a full statutory framework for best value, which would have given local people the assurance that councils' implementation of best value and service performance was transparent and subject to statutory independent audit. However, I have listened carefully to the concerns expressed by the Committee for the Environment, district councils and others regarding the introduction of the framework now. Consequently, in clause 1, I propose to omit subsections 3, 4 and 5, which provide for a best value framework. Importantly, however, councils are still required to make arrangements for continuous improvement having regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness, and in consultation with local people.

It was important in my opening remarks to demonstrate the many and varied issues that I had to consider at this key stage of the Local Government (Best Value) Bill. The proposals in amendment 1 reflect a balanced consideration of those issues. Significantly, the amended clause 1 is critical to the whole Bill, as it determines the broad principles of the best value duty.

Clause 2, for example, makes provision for the Department's input to the statutory framework, outlined in subsections 1(3) to 1(5). Under that clause, the Department would have the statutory power to issue guidance on matters such as public consultation, service reviews,

performance improvement plans, performance indicators, standards, and so on. The amendment of clause 1 renders that clause superfluous. However, those matters are all key components of best value, and the Department will continue to develop them in partnership with councils, the Committee for the Environment and others under the non-statutory arrangements.

Clauses 3, 4 and 5 make provisions regarding the auditing arrangements and responsibilities that underpin the best value framework. As I said earlier, it is important that best value be transparent and accountable. An independent audit of best value would provide further assurances to local people in that regard. Without such a statutory framework, it is not appropriate to put in place a statutory auditing arrangement. In the absence of a statutory audit of best value, I will ask my officials to consider, in conjunction with all appropriate bodies, what auditing arrangements are suitable under the non-statutory framework and also to explore, with the local government auditor, what assurances can be provided with regard to the outworking of best value under a general statutory duty.

Clause 7 was originally intended to provide a power to exempt specific councils from specific duties under the statutory best value framework. However, no council would be exempted from the general duty of best value under the amended clause 1. Accordingly, clause 7 is no longer relevant to the Bill. In recognising the significant impact of amendment 1 on clauses 2 to 5, I am nevertheless content that the non-statutory arrangements for best value will still be in place to ensure that the momentum and development of best value continue. Consequently, I will not be opposing the removal of clauses 2 to 5, or clause 7, from the Local Government (Best Value) Bill.

Amendment 3 to clause 8 would omit the interpretation provided for "the principal act", on the understanding that the reference to the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act 1972 would not be required in clause 9, if amendment 5 were carried. In accordance with my earlier conclusions on the statutory framework as it relates to the audit of best value, I will not be opposing amendment 5.

Amendment 4 is a further amendment to clause 8 that would remove the reference to the "principal act" in line 18, in keeping with amendment 3. Amendment 6, which amends the long title, makes provision for a general duty on councils

"to make arrangements for continuous improvement in the way in which their functions are exercised."

The duty is further clarified in clause 1, subject to amendment 1.

I commend these amendments to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): On behalf of the Environment Committee, I ask the House to support the amendments put forward by the Committee and the Minister. I take the opportunity to thank the Minister for his kind words, which are appreciated by myself and, I am sure, by the Committee members.

I suppose that even as recently as two weeks ago, no one on the Environment Committee would ever have imagined that I would rise to support the Minister. At the same time, we never imagined that the Minister would support the Committee's proposal for this Bill. However, a week is a long time in politics and where there is a will, there is often a way. I thank the Minister and his officials, some of whom are present, for their willingness to consider the propositions, proposals and amendments suggested by the Committee.

It is important at this stage to clear up any misunderstanding that Members or others outside this House may have about the stance of my Committee towards best value. We do not oppose the principle. We support the work carried out by councils over the past three years on a voluntary best value basis, and we desire to see that work enhanced and continuing.

Paragraph 52 of the Committee's report on the Bill states

"This Committee does not oppose a statutory framework for the implementation of Best Value within Northern Ireland and readily endorses the Best Value principles of transparency, auditability, accountability and value for money for Council services."

The ratepayers and residents of Northern Ireland deserve the best possible framework appropriate to Northern Ireland. It is clear to all that its development will require proper consultation achieved by genuine listening to all key stakeholders.

The councils and other interested bodies expressed concern and opposition to the Bill as originally proposed, because they believed that it was flawed and that many of its proposals were premature. We are delighted that the Bill before the House today has taken into consideration many of the concerns of elected representatives on district councils and other interested bodies, and especially those of the Environment Committee.

However, the Committee consistently opposed what we saw as a flawed and premature attempt at a Bill to legislate for a prescriptive best value framework. Some might suggest that the members of the Environment Committee are merely putting forward their own views or pursuing their own interests on the issue. Nothing could be further from the truth. I contend that few Committees in this House have consulted as widely and as fully as my Committee did on best value.

Why are we convinced that the Bill brought before this House in July 2001 was flawed, premature, and overtly prescriptive, and did not deserve our support?

I wish that I could give one simple answer, but that is not possible. At this stage I am not inclined to deal in any depth with the reasons of the Minister and his officials for thinking that the Bill deserved our support at that time.

1.00 pm

In its comprehensive report, the Committee disproved every argument that was put forward by the departmental officials. For example, the Department already has sufficient legislative authority to empower the local government auditor to carry out value-for-money audits. The Committee's report provided overwhelming evidence that, if the Bill had proceeded as it was originally presented to the House, it would have been a serious mistake with far-reaching consequences.

The Committee supports the Minister's amendments to clause 1 and the long title. In particular, the Committee is pleased to note that in clause 1, subsection 2, the Minister intends to introduce a general duty for best value, along with a requirement for consultation with ratepayers and others. He is content not to proceed with the rest of clause 1. That significant change has also been reflected in the changes to the long title.

I ask the Assembly to join the Committee in opposition to clauses 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7 standing part of the Bill. Those clauses were originally included to support a detailed statutory framework for best value, and are no longer needed. The Minister has indicated that he will not oppose such amendments, and I once again put it on record that the Committee appreciates and welcomes the Minister's response.

It is proposed that clause 6 remain in the Bill. It is an important enabling clause that will allow for amendments to the current list of non-commercial matters in the interests of councils promoting key policies. The Committee has scrutinised and consulted on the clause, and asks the House to support it.

The Minister has proposed a minor consequential amendment to clause 8. The Committee has no hesitation in supporting that amendment, and I ask the House to support it also.

The Committee has proposed a relatively straightforward amendment to clause 9. It is necessary in the light of the removal of the statutory framework provisions for best value. The remainder of clause 9 is important because it repeals compulsory competitive tendering, which all Members will welcome. That amendment has the Minister's support, and I ask the House to support it.

Before us today is a clear demonstration of what can be achieved when a Minister and his officials work closely with the Statutory Committee. We have all seen the benefits of co-operation to arrive at a mutually accepted solution, and it must be recognised that both interests have done what was needed to achieve that

end. For example, not only did the Committee give over a significant part of several recent meetings to scrutinising the Minister's proposed amendments, but, as the Minister knows, his officials attended an extraordinary meeting last week to accommodate an urgent presentation by his Department. The manner, spirit and content of that presentation were most helpful.

I must recognise that the Minister has moved considerably to reach the point we are at today. Up to last Thursday, he had given written assurances to the Committee on several fronts. For example, guidance to district councils on the Bill will be developed by the Department through full consultation with the Environment Committee, employment representatives, district councils and other local government interests. It will include references to other issues, such as environmental considerations and other relevant statutory provisions.

While the Minister has indicated that he will review best value in the future, he has said that any substantive development will be brought about only through primary legislation before the House.

I will not pretend that working on the Bill has been an easy road for the Committee, the Department, the Minister or his officials. However, the experience has been worthwhile, because the Bill will be in the interests of the ratepayers of Northern Ireland.

I place on record my thanks and appreciation for the diligent work of the Committee members, especially the Committee secretariat and all those who responded to the Committee. I thank them for their assistance, application and, on some occasions, their patience. Again, I thank the Minister and his officials for the manner in which we were able to conclude work on the Bill. I urge the House to support the amendments.

Mr Leslie: Like Dr McCrea, I welcome the Bill in its amended form and support the amendments and the negating of certain clauses which were necessary to reconstruct the Bill in a manner that makes best value less prescriptive than originally intended.

I fully support the principle of best value, which is well communicated by both the long title and clause 1. This will not be the end of the matter, but I trust that it will not and should not be revisited until the completion of the review of local government and the implementation of the forthcoming new Government procurement policies. Until we know where we stand with those issues, we cannot reasonably address changes to the way in which councils conduct their affairs.

I particularly welcome subsection 2 of clause 1. That is an important part of the Bill, for a slightly unsatisfactory reason. Subsection 2 of clause 1 asks councils to take account of the views of persons who appear to the council to be representative of ratepayers; persons who use or are likely to use services provided

by the council; and persons with an interest in the council district. In effect, this suggests in part that the membership of a council may not accurately reflect all those views. If we ask ourselves how often a council seat in Northern Ireland has changed hands because of a ratepayer issue, the answer is almost never, so we can see the potential significance of this part of the Bill.

This has a real resonance at present in the Moyle district, in my constituency of North Antrim. I regret that the Bill is not law now, because clause 1, subsection 2, could have a considerable bearing on the outcome of the current heated debate about the future of the visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway.

I support the amendments.

Mr A Doherty: I will speak in general terms about all the clauses and amendments. I have been on the horns of a dilemma for a considerable time, which is not a comfortable place to be. The dilemma arises from the fact that I — and I hope all Members — want the principles of best value to be adapted and implemented economically, effectively and efficiently, with full regard to equality and, where appropriate, to the environment.

It must happen in every arm of public administration, including local government. My dilemma was that I was not convinced that the Bill as first proposed would achieve what the Minister hoped it would achieve, and what we had the right to hope it would achieve. My dilemma has not been lessened by the fact that I come to this debate as a ratepayer and a taxpayer, an SDLP member, a member of the Committee for the Environment and, for many difficult years now past, as a district councillor. All those factors have coloured my understanding of how best value might be achieved in public administration.

I was struck by a statement that I read recently that has been attributed to the President of the United States, George W Bush:

"I have opinions of my own — strong opinions — but I do not always agree with them."

Hail to the chief. On reflection, I must say to myself and others: if the cap fits, wear it. How many of us have strong opinions that have been formed sometimes for the right reasons and sometimes for the wrong reasons that have been influenced by our background and experiences? On more mature reflection, we may have to acknowledge that some of our deeply felt opinions are flawed, that perhaps we should not agree with them and that it might be right for us to change or at least moderate them. All that takes courage.

The relevance of that point to today's business is that the Bill has reached this stage as a result of a long, hard process that involved much discussion and debate. It has been acknowledged that, although there have

been hiccups, the voluntary arrangement of best value is a concept worth developing and that it must have proper safeguards and effective monitoring and guidance. However, that must arise from genuine consultation between central Government, the councils and the other stakeholders in the process. Such partnership is at the heart of true democracy.

In Northern Ireland politics, the SDLP created the partnership principle. It introduced that principle to the councils, and steered them and the country along the painful road to the point where partnership is now almost universally acknowledged in principle, if not always in practice. It is right that partnership should be the cornerstone of best value and that best value should be an evolutionary process that takes account of the considerable differences between councils and between the communities that they serve. Best value must not be too prescriptive, particularly at the initial stage. That would stifle its natural growth and development and smother hardworking councillors and their officers in a welter of red tape.

Of course, rigorous monitoring and auditing are essential, and there must be provision for stringent reviews as and when necessary. That will be welcomed if it is seen not as “big brother” watching you, but as “big brother” working with you.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment has affirmed the Committee’s collegiate acceptance of the Bill as proposed today. After giving it careful consideration, the SDLP is also prepared to give it its blessing. We know that it is not a final solution — we must be wary of them. We know that there will be difficulties ahead, but we have confidence in the good intentions of councillors and their staff. We know that they will give it their best shot and that the country will benefit from it.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Although “process” is a much-used word, it is appropriate to frame comments on this matter in the context of its being a process. The establishment of the Assembly, the Departments and the periodic monitoring rounds — when significant sums of money can sometimes be found — show that the concept of best value must be comprehensively applied.

Indeed, the important and valuable work of the Public Accounts Committee demonstrates that there are issues of accountability and transparency that affect more than the local government arena.

1.15 pm

As someone who has considerable experience of working on a council — although I am no longer a councillor — I was concerned at the initial approach. Local councils, which are an important local democratic forum, account for 5% of the overall public expenditure

programme. Clearly, a prescriptive statutory approach to best value, directed only at local government, would not have addressed how we most effectively and efficiently apply the resources to hand.

It was an interesting experience working on the Committee. It took some considerable time to get through the various issues. However, there was a consistency in our focus that eventually commanded the attention of the Minister. I want to join with those Committee members who have acknowledged the responsiveness of the Minister and his advisers once we got down to the issues. That was an important learning experience all round.

My party will support the Bill as presented. I want to support the expert and comprehensive summary of the Committee’s deliberations given by our Chairperson, and also to commend the staff who, throughout the process — and sometimes under extreme pressure — provided expert and technical advice that helped all concerned, including the Minister and his advisers. There is no such thing as a perfect result. I argued, as did other parties, for the inclusion of references — the five Es. We thought that references to equality and the environment in clause 1 would be important.

However, that is not to cavil about what I believe was significant, important and constructive work, and a constructive engagement between the Department, the Minister and his officials, and the Statutory Committee, which has demonstrated in this case its primary purpose and reason for being. Before us today is the amalgamation of the collective experience of the Assembly, and it deserves collective support from the Assembly. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Ford: I want to add to this overwhelming feeling of consensus. It is such a relief after all the weeks the Committee spent on this Bill, and it is a great pleasure. The Bill, as amended — and it appears from the speeches this morning that it is likely to be amended — will leave this session in a far better shape than when it first came to the Committee. Indeed, it will probably leave here in better shape than when it left the Committee Stage. In the spirit of this growing consensus, we should accept that the Minister’s amendments have improved on that which the Committee sought to do during its deliberations over the Bill.

This has been a two-stage process that fundamentally shows the value of devolution. In particular, it shows the value of a Committee that engaged seriously on this issue — at great lengths, and over many sittings — and arrived at a unanimous position. We owe some credit to the Chairperson of the Committee for this. Others have already praised him, and I add my praise, both of him and of the staff who ensured that all the representations made were taken into account.

There is no doubt that this is what devolution has achieved. Had we still been under direct rule, this Bill would have gone through the House of Commons some time in the early hours of the morning as an Order in Council — unamended and unamendable — on the nod, even though we believe, and it appears that the Minister has accepted our point, that its provisions, as originally proposed, were not appropriate to the sort of councils we have in Northern Ireland. If anything, we should learn that devolution has proved that we no longer need to take the “one size fits all” approach to the governance of the UK.

There are four different regions with four different needs. Thank goodness we have managed to get this one right. We welcome the abolition of compulsive competitive tendering, and this Bill takes us beyond that, a situation which was clearly long overdue. That sets the tone for how best value can continue to operate on a voluntary basis and for how full consultation can take place in order to decide on the statutory measures that are needed in the future.

I wish to highlight a couple of points. Arthur Doherty and Mitchel McLaughlin have made the first one, and I regret that we could not persuade the Minister to add environment and equality to the three Es of economy, efficiency and effectiveness in clause 1, subsection 1, but I do welcome his written assurance to the Committee last week that they will be included in the guidance. At least it shows that we sought to co-operate. I also welcome the Minister’s assurances about consultation between the Committee and councils and their staff as guidance is developed. However, I hope that we can see some more innovation from the Department as guidance is developed further now that they have started to step outside the English model.

Would it not be nice if councils were given a really challenging task when reporting on best value instead of ticking several hundred boxes on a form, which means little to the council officers who tick them and absolutely nothing to the residents? Why not set them a real challenge by asking them to produce a report on their achievements in one year, in simple language, on two sides of an A4 sheet? That would be much more creative and much more difficult, but much more meaningful to residents.

A few weeks ago the Assembly inflicted something of a defeat on the Department of the Environment over the Game Preservation (Amendment) Bill. I am delighted that the Department has learnt from that and that we have managed to seek consensus and work together on the Local Government (Best Value) Bill. I do not need to repeat the points that have been made by other Committee members. We must build on the approach of consensus, and I hope that the Department, in conjunction with the Committee, district councils and their staff, continues to make progress in the kind

of genuine partnership that best value should really be about.

Mr Poots: I support the Bill as amended. I am pleased that we have reached this stage and that we are in a position where the Committee and the Department are singing from the same hymn sheet and agreeing on this. As a district councillor, I should declare an interest in the matter.

One of the original concerns was that councils would be laden down with paperwork and would not be able to deliver best value. Fortunately, we have moved to a position where real best value can be achieved because of the amendments that have been made, particularly to the massive audit trail that was requested.

The comments from the leader of the Alliance Party were interesting, particularly his remark about the two sides of an A4 sheet filled with achievements in a local council area. I am sure that the people in Antrim are glad that he is no longer a councillor there, if the council could fill only two sides of an A4 sheet with its achievements. I am sure other councils wish to achieve much more.

Mr Ford: The record will show that I said that it would be particularly challenging to put them on only two sides, and, obviously, that was a reference to Antrim.

Mr Poots: It might be a challenge for Antrim, but I am sure that other councils would have no problem filling considerably more than two sides of an A4 sheet. Nevertheless, I welcome the progress that has been made. Perhaps it will send a signal to Ministers and Departments that they must take notice of what Committees say and do.

The Bill, as it stood, did not have the support of local authorities, unions and, ultimately, the wider public, although it is not a major people-related issue. Nevertheless, we have achieved a broad consensus, and all parties have given support to the amended Bill. In that respect it is important that Ministers pay more attention to what the public and civil servants say. When looking for new Bills — and there should be more Bills — Ministers must look at what people want and not at what civil servants believe they want and not at what has been picked up from England and Wales and handed straight to Northern Ireland.

Let us look at each Bill as it stands, and let us represent the views of the people on each of those Bills rather than simply follow Civil Service-speak laboriously.

I thank all those involved for their efforts to reach this point, and I commend the Bill.

Mr Savage: In my opinion, best value has always seemed not only logical but something that ratepayers and electors expect councillors to do as a matter of course. What else would a council do but seek best

value and test the market? This is a great opportunity. It would seem indefensible if someone were to stand up to speak in favour of anything other than best value in the spending of taxpayers' money. That person would not have much of a future in politics and the modern world. This Bill is an honest attempt to secure best value, and so deserves the support of the Assembly. The Minister has been accommodating and has taken account of the representations made to him on the Bill. He has listened, and has been a reasonable and responsible Minister.

Securing best value keeps Northern Ireland in line with other parts of the United Kingdom such as England and Wales. The Bill will be an important benchmark for the local government auditor. It will be an invaluable tool for measuring councils' performance. An important function of the Assembly is always to seek best value. We must become the advocates of local government and all its trimmings — efficient, effective and simplified government. I stress the importance of simplified government, of which the Bill is a linchpin. For those reasons I support the Bill and the Minister's efforts to bring it forward.

Mr O'Neill: I should perhaps declare an interest; as everyone knows, I have been a councillor for some time.

I have often heard it said that the only thing that is worse than no law at all is bad law. Through the approach that we have taken on this issue, I have a small fear that we could be getting close to making a bad law. It is important that we get best value right, because it is a vital area for us all. However, I welcome the Bill, and I will support it, if for no other reason than that it is an alternative to compulsory competitive tendering. Like many Members, I have witnessed the damage that that policy has caused both to the delivery of services and to the rights and welfare of employees. I will be glad to see it removed.

Why am I concerned? Best value must be applied in statute beyond district councils. That is the truism. Councils spend only 2.8% of the block grant. The 5% referred to earlier by Mr McLaughlin also includes money raised through rates. The interesting point is that boards, bodies and quangos in Northern Ireland spend approximately 65% of the block grant, yet they are not being subjected to best value rigour.

I am aware of the nature and content of this piece of legislation; a much more comprehensive approach is needed to ensure that best value is introduced properly.

1.30 pm

I still have concern about the level of consultation with district councils, particularly because of what happened in the preparation for this legislation, and I wonder if that is an indication of the level of consultation that

will surround its implementation. I hope not. There is an opportunity for guidance to be drawn up in consultation with all the participants.

Conversely, there is little evidence of opportunity for scrutiny and control in what I have read surrounding this Bill. How will it be done? Will the guidance provide it? Sometimes pundits like to take a poke at Government and local government, and they may be critical of some Members expressing concerns about best value in councils. However, they do not understand that councils want to see scrutiny and control with best value. They want to ensure that everybody is working at the same level. They do not want to see a system in which one council applies the rigours of best value completely and another council goes through the motions. We need scrutiny and control, and that is what councils want. They do not want a flabby system of best value.

I regret that we are not in a position to benefit from the experience of best value in England. That research will be available in the next few months. I do not take the view that I heard expressed in the Chamber earlier that the Department simply lifted the legislation from England. Had it lifted the legislation from England, some of the amendments that have been made would not have been needed.

That policy was introduced in England about four years ago, and there is a wealth of experience there. While our system is patently different, and while our needs and situation are also very different, it strikes me as sensible to wait and take advantage of that experience. Why should we run the risk of making mistakes or reinventing the wheel? However, I concede that within the Bill and its preparation, and as expressed today by the Minister, there is a clear understanding of the need to monitor closely all those developments and a willingness to incorporate change where it can be proven to be wise. I welcome that commitment from the Minister and rest my hope on it for the future development of best value.

Mr Foster: I thank all the Members who participated in the debate for their undoubted interest and support for the best value principles. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment for his supportive remarks. I also thank the Committee and its officials for the way in which they have responded to the arguments that I have put forward in seeking to have a statutory duty on best value. The Committee and the Department conducted business on best value in a very positive manner, which we must encourage for future issues.

Dr McCrea said that the Local Government (Best Value) Bill, as originally proposed, was flawed. I regret his use of the term "flawed", because the Department and the Committee worked together in a spirit of co-operation to reach a balanced approach to best value. However,

as I said in my opening address, we must now look forward to the future rather than dwell on the past.

Mr Ford made a point about making best value reporting more user-friendly to local people. I share that view and have always contended that I do not wish to make best value cumbersome or over prescriptive.

I have committed the Department to work in partnership with local government and the Committee for the Environment to develop further guidance. I am confident that our guidance will help councils and will be in the interests of local people.

Other representatives have spoken out about different public service issues. My responsibility is to deliver a best value framework within local government — my remit extends no further than that. The Departments of Central Government operate under a value for money or best value framework. Elements of that include a Government accounting manual and accompanying financial regulations, a requirement to produce resource accounts and to operate a resource budget, a detailed Programme for Government incorporating departmental public service agreements, corporate and business plans, internal audit and Northern Ireland Audit Office scrutiny, and the Public Accounts Committee of the Assembly. We must accept that we are all under scrutiny.

The Assembly is, rightly, concerned about standards of transparency and accountability throughout the public sector. That is vital. As a local Minister, it is my duty to further promote transparency and accountability in the use of council resources and the provision of local services.

I have listened carefully to Members' representations and to the concerns expressed by the Committee about the timing of the implementation of a statutory framework for best value in Northern Ireland. I am pleased that we now have a basis on which to agree a way forward that maintains a statutory best value duty in the interests of local people.

I thank the Committee, its support staff and my departmental officials for their unstinting endeavours in recent weeks to secure an agreed strategy for developing best value. I also thank those who contributed to the further consultation process, and in particular, my own staff, who worked diligently to put the Bill together.

I am committed to work in close consultation with the Committee for the Environment, district councils and other local government interests to further develop best value guidance under the voluntary arrangements. That guidance should benefit councils in their pursuit of best value, providing the necessary consistency of approach and enabling councils to learn from one another. In the Bill, I have responded to the representations made to me and have sought to balance those representations with a firm commitment to pursue high standards of

transparency and accountability in local government. That is vital to all Government Departments. Local people require and deserve no less.

Amendment No 1 agreed to.

Clause 1, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been put to clauses 2, 3, 4 and 5. However, some Members, and the Committee, have indicated their intention to oppose the question that those clauses stand part of the Bill. The question for each being the same, I am minded to group them, by leave, en bloc.

Hearing no objection, I put the question that clauses 2, 3, 4 and 5 stand part of the Bill.

Question, That clauses 2 to 5 stand part of the Bill, put and negatived.

Clause 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: A number of Members have listed their intention to oppose clause 7. I put the question that clause 7 stand part of the Bill.

Question, That clause 7 stand part of the Bill, put and negatived.

New clause

Mr Foster: I beg to move amendment No 2: After clause 7 insert:

“Power to modify statutory provisions and confer new powers

(1) If the Department thinks that a statutory provision prevents or obstructs compliance by councils with the duty under section 1(1), the Department may by order make provision modifying or excluding the application of the provision in relation to councils.

(2) The Department may by order make provision conferring on councils any power which the Department considers necessary or expedient to permit or facilitate compliance with the duty under section 1(1).

(3) In exercising a power conferred under subsection (2) a council shall have regard to any guidance issued by the Department.

(4) An order under this section may—

(a) impose conditions on the exercise of any power conferred by the order (including conditions about consultation or approval);

(b) amend a statutory provision;

(c) include supplementary, incidental, consequential and transitional provisions.

(5) No order shall be made under this section unless a draft has been laid before, and approved by resolution of, the Assembly.

(6) Before the Department makes an order under this section it shall consult—

(a) persons appearing to it to represent councils; and

(b) such other persons as appear to the Department to be representative of interests affected by the proposals.

(7) If, following consultation under subsection (6), the Department proposes to make an order under this section it shall lay before the Assembly a document explaining the proposals and, in particular—

- (a) setting them out in the form of a draft order; and
- (b) giving details of consultation under subsection (6).

(8) Where a document relating to proposals is laid before the Assembly under subsection (7), no draft of an order under this section to give effect to the proposals (with or without modification) shall be laid before the Assembly until after the expiry of the statutory period beginning with the day on which the document was laid.

(9) In preparing a draft order under this section the Department shall consider any representations made during the period mentioned in subsection (8).

(10) A draft order laid before the Assembly in accordance with subsection (5) must be accompanied by a statement of the Department giving details of—

- (a) any representations considered in accordance with subsection (9); and
- (b) any changes made to the proposals contained in the document laid before the Assembly under subsection (7)."

This amendment proposes a new clause to the Bill in recognition of further representations made to the Department during the consultation process.

This clause has two prime functions — to enable the Department to change a statutory provision that, in the Department's opinion, prevents councils from delivering best value under the duty described in clause 1(1) and to enable the Department to pursue the granting to district councils of more wide-ranging powers exercisable in the interests of delivering best value. Such powers are granted to local authorities in Great Britain under sections 16 and 17 of the Local Government Act 1999. I believe that similar powers are also proposed in best value legislation planned for Scotland. The powers provided in this clause are exercisable through subordinate legislation, requiring a draft to be laid before the Assembly and its approval sought under affirmative resolution.

In taking forward such proposals the Department is required to consult with district councils and all other appropriate bodies. The proposals will also be subject to the consultation procedures laid down by the Assembly for major policy and legislative proposals. In conclusion, this amendment is proposed in the interests of district councils and has the support of the Environment Committee. I commend this amendment to the Assembly.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I rise to speak on behalf of my Committee and ask the House to support amendment No 2, as proposed by the Minister. This is an entirely new clause, which arrived with the Committee in the Minister's proposal of 24 January 2002. The Committee had previously raised with the Minister the possibility of such a clause being included in the Bill, following representations from various councils —

notably Belfast City Council and Antrim Borough Council. At the time, the Minister dismissed the inclusion of such a clause, as it would require extensive consultation. The Committee has now scrutinised the proposed clause and consulted on its terms. It is an important enabling clause which, for example, has the potential to allow councils the flexibility to develop those partnerships that may be vital for them to deliver the optimum solutions for all ratepayers.

Members will note that the clause has wide-ranging powers. However, the Department must consult widely, with any orders under this clause being laid in draft and needing to receive the Assembly's approval. Furthermore, any forthcoming departmental guidance on this clause must be agreed with the Environment Committee. The Committee is therefore satisfied that the clause merits inclusion in the Bill and asks that the Assembly support amendment No 2, as proposed by the Minister. We thank him once again for his consideration.

Mr Foster: I thank the Committee Chairperson for his remarks, and I thank everyone for their help and co-operation. I have nothing further to add to my earlier comments, only to thank the Environment Committee for supporting the amendment.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

New clause to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 8 (Interpretation)

Amendment No 3 made: In page 5, line 16, leave out from beginning to end of line 17. — [Mr Foster.]

Amendment No 4 made: In page 5, line 18, leave out "principal Act" and insert "Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 (c. 9)". — [Mr Foster.]

Clause 8, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 9 (Amendment and repeals)

Amendment No 5 made: In page 5, line 21, leave out subsection (1). — [Rev Dr William McCrea.]

Clause 9, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 10 and 11 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

Amendment No 6 made: In page 1, leave out from "imposing" to "effectiveness" and insert

"placing on district councils a general duty to make arrangements for continuous improvement in the way in which their functions are exercised". — [Mr Foster.]

Long title, as amended, agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Local Government (Best Value) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION STRATEGY

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the proposed regional transportation strategy consultation paper published on 4 February 2002.

1.45 pm

I am delighted to have the opportunity to bring to Members' attention the consultation paper on the proposed regional transportation strategy, which I am issuing today for public comment. This is the latest stage of my Department's consultation on strategic transportation issues. I want to thank those in the House and the many local councillors and their key stakeholders who have already given their views to inform the policy development process.

The active engagement of the Committee for Regional Development over the past 18 months has been extremely welcome in helping to shape our proposals. There are a number of other key individuals to whom I wish to record appreciation, and I intend to do that, with your permission, Mr Speaker, when winding up.

If Members cast their minds back to June 2000, they will recall the debate on the state of our transportation assets when the House unanimously called for increased funding for public transport and roads. Since then, increased funding has been allocated to address the immediate needs of our railways, a decision informed by the work of the railways task force.

The Assembly has also voted additional funds for capital road schemes, reflecting the widely recognised need for increased investment, which the then Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mark Durkan, readily acknowledged in his September statement to the Assembly on the draft Budget. The proposed 10-year regional transportation strategy identifies strategic transportation investment priorities and considers potential additional sources of funding. Today I want to outline some of the main initiatives contained in the proposed strategy and the expected key outcomes that they would bring about.

There are exciting possibilities such as the pilot rapid transit scheme for the Belfast metropolitan area, over £200 million of strategic highway improvements, elimination of much of the serious road maintenance backlog, the introduction of a new bookable, accessible rural transport system, more quality bus corridors, upgraded rail services and better use of information technology. However, these initiatives will require significant investment, and we have to consider where the necessary funds might come from. Before turning to the proposal, it is worth reminding ourselves of the wider context in which we start and how the proposed

regional transportation strategy will integrate into the overall strategic development of the region.

Just over four months ago, the Assembly adopted the regional development strategy 'Shaping Our Future'. It acknowledged the critical contribution that improved transportation infrastructure can make to the region's future success, so the regional transportation strategy is a vital component of that. Its purpose is to support the regional development strategy and move over a 10-year period towards achieving a long-term transportation vision, which — I am sure everyone remembers — is to have a modern, sustainable and safe transportation system that benefits society, the economy and the environment and that actively contributes to social inclusion and everyone's quality of life. It is essential to recognise that unless significant additional funds are secured, the regional transportation strategy will not be able to do this. However, I will return to this point later.

The five main objectives of the proposed strategy are to protect the environment, to improve safety, to facilitate economic growth, to improve accessibility and to foster integration, both with other Government policies and between different modes of transport. In addition, tackling social need, promoting social inclusion and ensuring an equitable and balanced strategy across the region have been integral considerations throughout the development of the proposed strategy. My Department has given specific consideration to the needs of people in rural areas, as well as those with distinct transport needs, including people with disabilities and older people.

Issues of distribution and equity, affordability and financial sustainability, practicality and public acceptability are integral to the methodology that has underpinned the development of the strategy. A draft equality impact assessment has also been carried out on the proposed strategy and is being issued today for public comment.

In section 6.5, Members will see that my Department has sought to identify the main inter-relationships with other Departments, initiatives and policies. The document acknowledges not only the contribution that such policies might make to the achievement of the transportation objectives, but also highlights the likely impact of the proposed strategy on other departmental priorities.

In relation to funding requirements and potential sources, I have already said that there is widespread acceptance that our current transportation assets are in poor condition following years of underinvestment. What is more, in transportation spend per capita Northern Ireland is currently well behind other regions of the UK, which in turn are significantly behind the transportation investment that European countries are making. Inevitably, Northern Ireland will fall even further behind, unless transportation investment is increased significantly.

If funding were to continue at current levels, the transportation system that would result would seriously undermine the social and economic goals of the regional development strategy agreed by the House only four months ago. The proposed strategy, therefore, assumes a funding level of £950 million above the existing level, which reflects the 2000 spending review outcome extrapolated over the 10-year period. Although that represents a considerable funding increase, I want to make it clear that the proposed regional transportation strategy will not achieve the regional development strategy transportation vision but will take a significant step towards it.

We have to remember that the regional development strategy is set in a 25-year time frame. If the scale of resources assumed in the 10-year proposed regional transportation strategy were to be continued over 25 years, the regional development strategy transportation vision could be achieved.

The potential sources of funding for the assumed additional £950 million are identified and discussed in detail in section 4.3 of the consultation paper. These include additional funds of £500 million from Executive programme funds and/or enhanced public expenditure baselines, increased developers' contributions to the value of £80 million and other funding from the private sector notionally put at £325 million.

Members will be interested to note that I have recently established a dedicated infrastructure funding division in the Department for Regional Development that will explore the scope and feasibility of an increase in the role of the private sector in helping to address the serious deficiencies in our regional infrastructure.

I will now discuss the main features of the proposed strategy and the key outcomes for different transport modes and particular groups. I do not propose to list the detailed initiatives of the proposed strategy, which are presented in section 5 of the consultation paper and which Members will have had the opportunity to study. I have already mentioned some of the noteworthy proposals and emphasise that the proposals taken as a whole represent a balanced and appropriate strategy for the four areas identified — the regional strategic transport network, the Belfast metropolitan area, other urban areas and rural areas.

The relative indicative funding by area is shown in the pie chart on page 50, and the split of expenditure reflects the proposed response to the different transportation needs identified through consultation in the preparation of the proposed strategy. The expected outcomes of the proposed strategy are presented in some detail in section 6, showing the impact on different groups of people and by different transport modes. The key outcomes are reflected in the targets that are associated

with the strategy. I draw Members' attention to several of the targets that have been set for 2012.

Bus targets include: an average age of buses of no more than eight years; an increase in Citybus patronage of 25% over that of 2001; and new Ulsterbus route networks in all towns. Rail targets include the replacement of all trains by new trains, and a rail patronage increase of 50% over that of 2001, with the exception of the Enterprise service. Targets for highways include: the completion of 10 bypasses; 30 additional kilometres of dual carriageway; 30 kilometres of widened carriageway; and eight major junction improvements on the regional strategic transport network. One further target is the provision of new rural public transport services to serve isolated communities and mobility-impaired residents.

I have highlighted some of the key issues in the consultation paper, and I have tried to convey the importance that I attach to the need for major transportation investment. Although the outcome for transportation will ultimately be determined in the budgetary process, the case for investment in that area is irresistibly strong, and the proposals that are presented today are earthed in the reality of the achievable.

I hope that the Assembly will note that significant progress has been made towards the development of the regional transportation strategy, and I welcome the opportunity to listen carefully to Members' initial views.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr A Maginness): On behalf of the Committee, I thank the Minister for the manner in which he and departmental officials ensured that the Regional Development Committee was kept informed and was consulted throughout the development of the regional transportation strategy.

The Regional Development Committee has taken an active and sustained interest in the development of the strategy. It has taken its responsibilities seriously, and, for that reason, its members have only recently returned from a fact-finding tour of public transport and traffic-management systems of several European cities. That was a particularly useful visit, which demonstrated what can be achieved not only with high levels of funding, but with well-thought-out policies and properly managed implementation plans.

If the regional transportation strategy is to succeed, it is vital that the proposed funding level of an additional £950 million is made available. That presents a challenge to the House and to the Executive in particular. However, if Members recognise the importance of developing our infrastructure and the extent of under-investment in roads and public transportation over the last 30 years, we must rise to the challenge. I appreciate that there are many pressing needs, in particular, the

Health Service and education. Nevertheless, we must not underestimate the benefit of a well-maintained transportation system to our long-term social, environmental and economic well-being.

The economy will benefit from less traffic congestion. The transportation of goods and services will be quicker and cheaper, and thus the local economy will be more competitive on this island and internationally.

That has greater significance when we consider that 99% of our freight is transported by road. An improved, efficient and attractive public transport system will have a positive impact on the tourist industry; it will make the transportation of freight quicker and cheaper, reducing congestion and opening employment and services to all. It will also make a significant contribution to improving social inclusion, which is a key governmental priority. In many rural and urban areas, approximately 30% of families do not have access to private transportation.

An effective public transportation system will bring benefits, if indirectly, to the Health Service.

Northern Ireland has the highest rate of road accidents and fatalities anywhere in the United Kingdom. If more people travelled on public transport, with a corresponding decrease in car usage, that would have a positive impact which would, in turn, reduce pressures on the Health Service. Consequently, given that the regional transportation strategy and its parent strategy, the regional development strategy, affect every aspect of society, we must approach it without sectional interests in mind. We must take a holistic approach and consider how the strategy will benefit the whole of Northern Ireland.

2.00 pm

I want to turn to some of the key elements of the regional transportation strategy. The consultation document outlines the funding that will be available in the four areas during the next 10 years. There is a pressing need for major investment in the regional strategic transport network. That is critical to ensuring that our major towns and cities are easily accessible while also allowing the efficient and timely transportation of people and freight.

A major step towards that goal was the announcement by the then acting First Minister, Sir Reg Empey, on 24 September 2001 of an additional £40 million to be made available for the trans-European network route from Larne to Belfast and from Newry to Dundalk. That was welcome. However, it is important that the transport needs of other main areas throughout the region, such as the north-west, are appropriately addressed. Derry is a key economic hub with a catchment area stretching to Strabane, Limavady and, indeed, Donegal. It is important, therefore, that the main arterial routes from Derry to Dublin and from Derry to Belfast are

appropriately funded and maintained. Efforts must be made to exploit available EU funding for cross-border infrastructure development. Greater efforts must be made to determine whether there can be greater co-operation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland on the trans-European network.

The potential for additional EU funding for infrastructure improvements appears to be underutilised in the regional transportation strategy. During the Committee for Regional Development's visit to Europe it met with several officials from the European Commission. After those meetings the Committee concluded that there is insufficient emphasis on getting access to EU funding. The amount of EU funding estimated for infrastructure in the regional transportation strategy is minimal, comprising only £10 million of the £950 million of potential extra funding sources. That should be compared with the Republic of Ireland's national development plan for 2000-06, which has estimated EU funding of 760 million euros — that is approximately £456 million. That represents 13% of the overall total expenditure on transportation. Northern Ireland's estimate for EU funding is derisory.

Given the financial pressures facing Northern Ireland, I commend the Minister for Regional Development and the Department for embracing the challenge by setting up a division to examine alternative sources of funding. That is vital. The Minister is taking a leading role in trying to access alternative sources. The Committee for Regional Development looks forward to exploring the Department's findings on that. There is no doubt that raising funding from whatever source is a thorny issue, but an issue that must be accepted.

The Committee's experience in Europe highlighted some of the novel ways in which finance is raised there. In France, for example, employers with more than 10 employees pay a levy that is ring-fenced for public transportation. In Germany there is a scheme whereby employers can contribute to meeting the cost of employees' public transport fares. Increasingly in the Republic of Ireland tolls are being used to pay for major road schemes. I am not necessarily advocating such methods, but I am highlighting the range of initiatives that should be explored fully. Throughout Europe, there is a tremendous emphasis on the public financing of publicly owned transportation outlets. There is much less emphasis on private money in continental Europe than in these islands.

On examining the breakdown of anticipated expenditure over the next 10 years, a large percentage — 65% — is earmarked for the road network, with only 35% set aside for public transport. There is no doubt that the infrastructure has suffered from decades of underfunding. Sizeable investment is needed to bring many of the roads up to an acceptable standard.

The Committee's visit to Europe has highlighted the benefit of investing heavily in public transport. A public transport system is dependent on a well-maintained transport infrastructure, but some road projects may be less important if there is a strong commitment to the reduction of car usage. That is a matter of traffic management that will, in turn, make a positive contribution to reducing bottlenecks and so reduce the need for such measures as road-widening schemes.

It is important that public transport targets be integrated properly with road capital and structural maintenance programmes. Increasing the road network to deal with current traffic levels may relieve congestion in the short term, but it will also facilitate increased car usage. We will inevitably end up back where we started — with congested roads, increased travelling time and high levels of pollution.

Public transport, particularly bus and rail transport, must be at the forefront of our plans in the development of sustainable transport that allows quicker journey times and easy and convenient access to services and employment. That is particularly crucial in rural areas. I note the inclusion in the regional transportation strategy of £31.5 million that has been earmarked for demand-responsive transport services for the more remote rural areas. That is to be warmly welcomed, and I hope that it will provide a new beginning for the provision of a quality public transport system in rural areas.

Undeniably, the rail network is under pressure. Indeed, the system would surely have collapsed if £105 million had not been invested in it following the report of the railways task force. Under the circumstances, the Department is to be commended for setting as targets the retention of the Whitehead service and the Derry to Ballymena line, as well as seeking to increase patronage by over 50% over the next 10 years. That is an important and innovative approach.

When the Committee recently visited the north-west, it experienced at first hand the poor state of the trains. It is self-evident that we cannot expect to increase rail patronage if the service is slow and of low quality — it defeats the very purpose of transportation. In the European cities that the Committee visited, a recurring theme was the high priority given to provision of an aesthetically attractive and clean public transportation system. Great emphasis was placed not only on buses but also on trams and light-rail systems, issues that we must explore. We will not attract people back to public transport unless it is seen as a viable alternative to the car. One has only to look at the success of the Belfast to Dublin Enterprise line to see what is possible.

I am reassured that the consultation document has set out expected outcomes, which are supported by a list of specific targets. I do not want to delay the House by going through the whole list of outcomes and

targets, but I will take the opportunity to highlight one or two. The regional transportation strategy states that it was considered too difficult to forecast future patronage on Ulsterbus and, therefore, no target has been set for increased patronage. However, targets have been set for Citybus and rail travel. Given Northern Ireland's limited rail network, Ulsterbus provides a valuable public service throughout Northern Ireland. We must, therefore, rise to the challenge and set clear and measurable targets for patronage on Ulsterbus. Such targets should not be viewed as stumbling blocks but as stepping stones to the provision of first-class public transportation system.

If we are to succeed in developing a sustainable public transportation system, we must also challenge ourselves to reduce car usage. We must set ourselves clear goals. Figures based on the 1998 survey show that traffic volumes in Northern Ireland are increasing almost twice as fast as those in Great Britain. The reduction of car usage is not about reducing passenger travel but about providing acceptable alternatives to the car. The regional development strategy also emphasised that approach, stating that the focus should be on moving people and goods rather than vehicles.

Although Northern Ireland's rail network is limited, it is nevertheless a fundamental and important aspect of public transport. Ninety-nine per cent of all freight is transported by road. In present circumstances that is unavoidable, but the issue must be addressed. One possible solution is to encourage greater use of the rail network to transport goods, and a clear target should be set. Substantial investment may be required, but we cannot shirk that challenge. The European Commission recently produced a consultative White Paper that placed considerable emphasis on encouraging a modal shift in the transportation of goods from road to rail. That White Paper contains many useful proposals, and it should be studied in depth by the Department for Regional Development.

We all face many challenges. Nevertheless, our vision must be clear and sustained. Much of what is envisaged in the regional transportation strategy will require time and commitment. Many of the benefits will not be immediately tangible and will require all of us to remain focused on the long-term goals. We seek to create a major cultural shift in attitudes to car usage and public transport. That in itself will require time, and it places a burden on Government and on elected representatives at all levels in Northern Ireland to support and promote our vision. Understandably, people's approach will not change unless there is visible commitment from Government.

On behalf of the Regional Development Committee, I welcome the public launch of the regional transportation strategy. I also welcome the commitment of the Minister and the Department to the vision outlined, and I look

forward, with the Committee, to supporting the Department's efforts to turn that vision into reality.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has set aside two and a half hours for this debate, and I can advise the House that a goodly number of Members wish to participate, so although there is no specific time limit on Members' speeches, I advise them to consider their Colleagues and not to stretch things too long. That is in respect of all Members, including the Member who has just spoken and the Member who is about to speak.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr McFarland): I welcome the regional transportation strategy. It begins a process that we hope will properly organise our transport systems. It is a good start, and I thank the Minister and the Department for their close co-operation. The Committee has been involved since the beginning. It is a model of how these things should be done.

I will speak briefly about several elements of the strategy, beginning with the key elements. The strategy divides itself essentially into the Belfast commuter system, the key transport corridors, local urban systems for towns and villages and the rural area.

With regard to the Belfast commuter system, we must adopt the lessons learnt in Great Britain and Europe, as described by the Chairperson. In a very short time, roads in Northern Ireland will gum up, such is the rapid increase in car usage. With this strategy we have an opportunity to get our act together and produce a transport system that will begin to remove cars from our roads.

2.15 pm

We should perhaps consider where we want to be in 10 years' time, as the strategy hopes to do. We should examine how we want our railways and buses to be in 10 years' time, particularly in the Belfast area.

It is hoped that the flagship rail line from Bangor to Belfast will come on stream early next year. The rail is currently being re-laid. New trains to service that line are due to arrive early next year. It gives us an opportunity to see what can be done, because, as the Chairperson said, we will not persuade people to get out of their cars unless we produce a public transport system that they will want to travel on. The line to Bangor will give us an opportunity to test that and to determine what percentage of daily commuters from Bangor can be persuaded to use the line to travel to Belfast.

The regional development strategy identifies two other development corridors; the first parallels the M1 from Lisburn, and the second parallels the M2 from Glengormley. Both corridors have rail systems. If complemented by the envisaged quality bus corridors serviced by fancy, comfortable, warm buses that people would wish to travel on, those would form additional key elements of the Belfast commuter system. The buses could be

fitted with transponders to allow them to change traffic lights to ensure a straight run into town. A park and ride service, at a location such as the Saintfield Road, would allow people to park and be taken down a quality bus corridor to the centre of Belfast in 10 or 12 minutes. Those are important elements, and until they are in position, we are unlikely to persuade commuters to get out of their cars.

Having put these transport systems into being, we may need to look at some radical issues in the city centre. On the Committee's visit to Europe, it saw that officials had drawn a ring around the centre of Strasbourg and ruled that — apart from resident parking — cars were not allowed. It was a dramatic measure that has had an amazing effect. An extremely smart transport system has been produced to go with it, and, as a result, the city has a much improved commuter system.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member will be aware that Strasbourg is a twelfth-century town with narrow streets, many of which are cobbled and considerably older than those in any other European state. Therefore, it made total sense to protect those environmental interests.

Mr McFarland: That is correct; parts of Strasbourg are quite small. However, parts of it are extremely large, because those in power at that time wanted large streets on which to march their armies up and down. Therefore, some areas of Strasbourg lend themselves aptly to both cars and trams, but there are many smaller areas. Of course, Belfast has Pottinger's Entry, and a bus could not be driven along it.

We should consider measures such as "no car zones" and congestion charging. If we had a fancy transport system, we could dissuade people from driving to the city centre by increasing parking charges so that it would be much cheaper to pay for public transport than for the daily car-parking fee.

Key transport corridors are critical to the freight industry, and I welcome the proposed changes to the Westlink. We have two motorways; one comes from the direction of Londonderry, the other from Armagh/Dungannon. They meet at the Westlink, and the entire thing gums up. How we did not spot that problem earlier, I do not know. I hope it will be sorted out, allowing freight and cars to be pushed through that area much quicker. Those motorways are key corridors, and commuter systems on them should free up the Westlink and allow for increased freight use.

We must also consider — and my Colleagues from West Tyrone are familiar with this — that, if we build a hospital in either Enniskillen or Omagh, there must be roads between those places to allow medical vehicles to travel in a sensible manner. That should be examined in the context of key transport corridors.

We will not get people in rural areas to stop using their cars. However, the rural transport initiatives, which involve the use of minibuses and smaller vehicles, are working well. We should consider co-ordinating our school buses. We have a crazy system whereby the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety runs buses for patients, the Department of Education runs school buses for part of the day, and the public transport system operates the rest of the bus service. Surely we can get our act together to co-ordinate those services and make more effective use of our transport system?

Co-ordination is the main lesson that I learnt from Europe. The Minister is trying to introduce a cross-ticketing system, which would allow passengers to buy a ticket to use any available transport system. We have seen such a system in action in Europe and it is very impressive. People would not have to run between stations to buy different tickets; they would be able to buy one ticket to travel from A to B.

I am worried about the lack of co-ordination and management of public transport. For example, when I lived in Donaghadee, my daughter travelled to school in Belfast every day. On her return journey, she arrived in Bangor by train two minutes after the scheduled departure of the bus to Donaghadee. At what level of management was that organised? The chap who organised the bus schedules operated from Newtownards, and the organiser of the train schedules operated from Bangor. They did not appear to speak to each other. We complained about the matter and it was finally sorted out. However, I am worried that such an attitude should be taken to public transport services. The managers of the transport system must change their approach. The Assembly hopes to co-ordinate the service and wants a higher degree of management and organisation to back up the new system.

I will speak briefly about finance. As the Committee is aware, I was concerned that too much was expected of the Executive programme funds. In response, the Minister and the Department revised their approach slightly. I am not confident that the Executive programme funds will be available to support the service in the substantial amounts that the plan envisaged. It is good to see that the Minister and the Department are now examining other sources of funding to back the strategy. The strategy is important and it must be funded, but it would be dangerous to overemphasise the role of the Executive programme funds.

Another lesson that was learnt from Europe was that we must keep public transport in public ownership. That may be difficult, but the lessons of privatisation are not positive. Having said that, in most European countries, those who use public transport systems pay for them. We are facing that fact here. The days when the public purse would cough up to cover the full cost of the system are probably gone. We must consider the need for increased contributions from the travelling

public. We may need to examine such fairly avant-garde systems as — horror of horrors — toll roads. If we want a good public transport system, someone must pay for it. Assembly Members may soon need to get their heads around some nasty choices on how we will pay not only for transport but for water and sewerage services. We can have either bad services or good services, which cost money.

I commend the regional transportation strategy — it is to be welcomed.

Mr Hay: I welcome the document, and I concur with other Members' remarks. The Committee worked well with the Minister and his departmental officials on the document. I congratulate the officials who continually attended the meetings to brief the Committee on the document. This is a 10-year blueprint for transportation in Northern Ireland generally. Historically, Northern Ireland has suffered from a lack of investment in transportation infrastructure, and there is no doubt that our transportation strategy has been underfunded for decades. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, Mr McFarland, said that, at the moment, nothing would encourage people to use public transport instead of their cars. With this blueprint, I hope that we can examine alternative funding measures. Everyone in Northern Ireland appreciates that something desperately needs to be done about our public transport system.

The Committee for Regional Development has experienced the train service from Belfast to Londonderry. Not long ago, Committee members travelled in a carriage that had missing windows; that is down to bad management of our public transport system. It was a fairly cold journey for some of the Committee members, but I told them that if they really want to experience public transport, they must use it and see it for themselves.

There is something drastically wrong with a train service that takes well over two hours to travel from Londonderry to Belfast. I drive from Londonderry to Belfast and back practically every morning, and it takes me about two hours. If there were a good train service, I would use it rather than travel in my own car. This issue will be debated in the Chamber for months to come.

I welcome not only the document that has been presented to the Assembly today but the timetable contained within it. In the past, many documents have been written about our transportation strategy in Northern Ireland. We have all received glossy brochures with no real action behind them so I therefore welcome the timetable for action contained in the document.

Future funding for transport systems in Northern Ireland and the role that the public sector may play in that are important issues too. If we, as public representatives in the Assembly, are to make the

document come alive in the coming months, hard decisions must be made concerning the funding of the strategy. We must examine seriously how we can get the funding to back the strategy. There is pressure on the Health Service and the education system, but without a proper transportation strategy Northern Ireland will suffer economically and socially in the long run.

I wish to raise the issue of a separate transportation strategy for the north-west, which the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development mentioned briefly.

Not so long ago our Committee had a meeting in Londonderry, and we seriously drove the point that it would be vitally important for the north-west of the Province that the Minister and his Department look —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have to bring the Member's remarks to a close for the present, as it is now time for questions to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The debate will resume immediately after Question Time, which is likely to be 4 pm. If the Member wishes, he may complete his remarks at that stage, before we move on to the rest of the debate.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that question 8, in the name of Mr McMenamin, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

Single Equality Bill

1. **Mrs E Bell** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the introduction of the single equality Bill. (AQO 717/01)

10. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on its plans for the single equality Bill. (AQO 738/01)

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Nesbitt): Before answering questions, I want to formally advise the Assembly about the absence of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister from Question Time today. The Assembly will no doubt be aware that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are in the United States of America at present. They addressed the World Economic Forum yesterday, and on Wednesday they will be opening the office for the Executive and the Assembly in Washington. Therefore, Mr Haughey and I are acting on behalf of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister today.

Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will group questions 1 and 10 together. We are committed to the introduction of a single equality Bill, which will harmonise anti-discrimination law, as far as practicable, and will extend into new categories, including age and sexual orientation. It will enable us to consider important developments in Britain and the Republic, and in European Union Directives.

At their meeting on 18 January, the Executive considered how the work involved in bringing forward proposals for a single equality Bill could best be taken forward. This is a highly complex area of law, and it is essential that we get it right. We must properly implement the recent European Directives dealing with discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, belief, sexual orientation, age or disability. When we drew up our original timetable, the Framework Directive had not been agreed. We now know what that Directive is, and it raises complex issues, particularly in relation to age, which must be resolved. We must also take into account new Directives on gender discrimination currently being developed.

In addition, we will be taking advice on those and other issues that have been raised. We have taken into account the consultation process, which requested from us further detailed consultation on our proposals and on specific issues. We are determined that this legislation will implement all our obligations and that it will be effective. A policy paper, setting out proposals for the Bill, will be published for consultation by the end of this year. In the meantime, we will meet our current EU commitments by introducing affirmative resolution regulations in the Assembly early next year. Also, early next year, we will consult separately on age discrimination and, following agreement, on the new Directive on sex discrimination. All this will ensure that the single equality Bill is taken forward in a way that takes account of emerging issues and, it is to be hoped, that provides good, workable law.

Mrs E Bell: I thank the Minister for his answer. Notwithstanding his comments about the complexity of the issue, does the Minister agree that this Bill is very welcome as it will strengthen equality law in this country, and that any delay can only be detrimental?

Mr Nesbitt: The aim is to have a simple law and to have equality. We wish for the best equality possible and equality of opportunity. That is what we are committed to. I recognise the concern about slowdown, but I repeat again that we are committed fully to the single equality Bill. We are having consultation about it, and more time is needed to consider specific areas. The people who are raising concerns about this matter should remember that the development of similar legislation in the Republic of Ireland took eight years.

Ms Lewsley: Can the Minister give an assurance that the single equality Bill will not lead to a reduction in protection? Can he give the reasons for the revision of the timetable in the first place?

Mr Nesbitt: I do not wish to repeat what I said only a moment ago about why we are taking time and why there is a revision because of EU Directives, but the Member appears to be concerned about other aspects of our performance. Let me give some examples. Great Britain has merely published a consultation document, in December 2001, on the implementation of EC Directives. In relation to age there are only general comments, although Great Britain intends to consult more fully on age discrimination this year. However, so far, many of the issues are unresolved.

I turn to the neighbouring jurisdiction on this island, the Republic of Ireland. Recently it has concentrated on a review of the grounds of discrimination covered in the current Acts, but there has been no public consultation so far about ways to implement the EC Directives. Therefore, in comparison with Britain and the Republic of Ireland, and given the difficulties that I have explained, what the Executive and the Assembly are doing with respect to equality of opportunity and the equality Bill is the best way forward for everybody in Northern Ireland.

Mr Watson: Will the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister address civil rights for members of the Loyal Orders — who are prevented from walking on certain roads — in the single equality Bill, as a matter of discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief, in keeping with the recent European Directives? Will the Assembly be given time to debate the Directive that deals with religion and belief?

Mr Nesbitt: The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is aware of inter-community tensions in Northern Ireland, which manifest themselves geographically in the areas that have been mentioned and, typically, through a process of parading. We want to see one community in Northern Ireland, where all diversities are celebrated in peace, harmony and understanding of each other. We support the local dialogue that is taking place in those key areas to resolve the disputes and division in our society. The issue of parading, in Drumcree or on the Garvaghy Road, for example, is a matter for the Northern Ireland Office and the Parades Commission.

As regards discussing and debating, the Assembly will, of course, debate those aspects of the equality Bill as well as aspects of employment discrimination, goods, facilities and services through the normal legislative process. There will be ample time for debate on those issues during that process.

Mr Davis: What priority will be given to disability rights, and what role will be adopted to support and encourage disabled people in 2003, the European year of people with disabilities?

Mr Nesbitt: The Executive will make their response to the recommendations of the Disability Rights Task Force, and that will be reflected in the single equality Bill — for example, we hope to extend the definition to include HIV and cancer, and we will ensure that that work is taken forward. We generally have a responsibility for the Disability Rights Task Force, and we are examining the recommendations that were issued for consultation last year. This year we are committed to improving civil rights for disabled people. In order to promote social inclusion, we will develop a strategy to implement the recommendations of the Disability Rights Task Force.

We are discussing the arrangements for 2003 — the European year of people with disabilities — with colleagues in Britain, and we will consider how best to take that forward in Northern Ireland when more information is available.

Executive Meeting: Date and Agenda

2. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline (a) the date of the next Executive meeting; and (b) the issues on the agenda. (AQO 715/01)

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Haughey): It is regrettable that a question such as this must come forward from a party involved in the Administration. It derives from the peculiar attitude that that party takes to attendance at Executive meetings. The next meeting of the Executive is scheduled to take place on Thursday 14 February. It is not the policy of the Administration to disclose in advance what issues will be raised at this or any other Executive meeting.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Can the junior Minister confirm whether the Executive have discussed or intend to discuss the contents of the Chief Constable's response to the Police Ombudsman's report into Omagh? Can he shed some light on the Deputy First Minister's weekend comments that he wants an outside investigator put in overall charge of this inquiry? Is that an Executive view? Is that the view of the Deputy First Minister, as opposed to the First Minister, or is that a party view? Does the junior Minister agree that the divisive comments by the Deputy First Minister at the weekend will not only further divide the board but are regarded as "Durkan's destruction plan" to defy consensus on that board?

Mr Haughey: I can neither confirm nor deny that the Executive have discussed these matters. I do not attend Executive meetings, and I can make no comment on Mr Paisley Jnr's other contentious remarks.

Mr B Bell: Following the judgement of Mr Justice Coghlin, can the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister confirm that it remains in order to withhold Executive papers uncovering and revealing what is going on in the Executive Committee from DUP Ministers?

Mr Haughey: I can confirm that the judgement of Mr Justice Coghlin makes it clear that the withholding of Executive papers from DUP Ministers is a reasonable response to the announced DUP policy of taking up ministerial office to enable it to uncover and reveal what is going on at the heart of Government. The declaration by the court in this instance related only to the withholding of a specific paper. The paper in question was issued to the DUP Ministers on Monday, 12 February 2001.

Mr Maskey: Further to the original question, given the obvious interest from several Members of the DUP in the Executive's agenda, can the junior Minister advise the House if at any time, as other Executive Ministers do, the DUP Ministers or their advisers ever communicate their position or view on any matter in respect of the Executive's agenda, for example, in writing or by any other method of communication?

Mr Haughey: I am not aware of any such communications.

Grant Award Fraud

3. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what action has been taken to eradicate fraud undertaken by unrepresentative "cross-community groups" claiming grant awards.
(AQO 752/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The vast majority of community relations funding is awarded to cross-community groups and projects. Single identity groups may be funded where the aim is to promote cross-community interaction and mutual respect. Grants are awarded where projects meet the eligibility criteria. The assessment process includes a range of checks: confirmation that the group is formally constituted; provision of a list of names of its board or management committee; and an examination of its financial position. All projects receiving funding are subject to regular monitoring to check on progress and to ensure that the agreed aims and objectives are being met.

In addition, it is a standard condition of grant that any documents, information or papers relating to a project must be provided on request and that any request to inspect or carry out audits is facilitated. Information provided on the application forms for grants and interim funding claims may also be made available to other Departments and agencies for the purposes of preventing and detecting crime. Applicants are made aware of that before accepting any offer of grant.

2.45 pm

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister agree that a problem could arise because a number of community groups that are not cross-community structured could benefit from cross-community funding? Within the overall remit of the community relations based funding, is the Minister currently investigating proceedings arising from the detection of fraudulent applications? Is any action being pursued to return funding sent out in error?

Mr Nesbitt: While it would be very serious if any group obtained funds on the basis of a deliberate misrepresentation, the availability of community relations funding is not confined to cross-community groups. In certain circumstances, funding may be provided to single-identity groups. Because of particular tensions and issues, those groups are working in a community where it may be necessary to prepare the ground for subsequent meaningful dialogue and interaction between the communities. Therefore the guiding principle is that the applicants, whether they are cross-community or single identity, must be able to demonstrate how their project can and will contribute to improving community relations. The key aim is to improve community relations and does not preclude the funding of a single group. However, the guiding principle must be clear.

There are currently no investigations proceeding on recovery of fraudulent applications.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that the vast majority of community groups have, on a purely voluntary basis, played a vital role in the process of cross-community bridge building? Can he assure the House that he will continue to encourage the work of such groups, despite the disgraceful actions of the very few who commit fraud?

Mr Nesbitt: Yes, I happily endorse what the Member has said. Work has been done, and I have no doubt it will continue to be done, at a community level in Northern Ireland. Too often those groups — and individuals — are not recognised for their work, and we commend that work. We recognise that as we in the Assembly are trying to work better together, those in the community will also work better together. We must recognise the need to do this, and I pay tribute to the work being done by community groups.

Visit to South Antrim

4. **Mr Ford** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if the First Minister and Deputy First Minister have any plans to visit South Antrim. (AQO 719/01)

Mr Haughey: There are currently no plans for the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a joint visit to South Antrim in the near future.

Mr Ford: It is interesting to see that the Ministers can be brief on some responses.

Since there are no plans to visit South Antrim, can the Minister explain why the legislative programme seems to have disappeared from sight, and why so few targets in this year's Programme for Government have been met? Ten months into the year, only about a quarter of the targets have been achieved. Can he explain to the Assembly and to my constituents in South Antrim how he proposes to improve matters in the future?

Mr Haughey: Do you propose to allow that question, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: There seems to be time to answer it, if there is a wish.

Mr Haughey: There is plenty of time to answer it, Mr Speaker. I raise a question over the very tenuous connection between that supplementary question and the original question. However, that is a matter within your province.

Mr Speaker: I assume that the question from the Member is that if the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister do not have time to visit South Antrim, it is because there are preparations in the other areas which the Member has raised.

Mr Haughey: I am well aware that that was what he was saying.

It is my view, and that of the Members of the Administration, that the criticism which has arisen in the last couple of weeks about the volume of legislation in the Assembly is very unfair and does not give credit to the Executive and the Assembly for the huge volume of work that has been undertaken.

A look at the Programme for Government, the Budgets, the work of the Committees and all of the other tasks that have been undertaken will show that the volume of work that has been put through the Assembly is very creditable indeed.

Since devolution, 23 Bills have been enacted, touching on very important aspects of everyday life in Northern Ireland. We have had complex pieces of legislation dealing with ground rents, child support and pensions. That record compares very well with the Scottish Parliament, which, in the equivalent period, has passed 29 pieces of legislation, and which has had much less uncertainty and many fewer alarms and excursions to deal with than the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have had here.

On 27 September 2001, Sir Reg Empey and Séamus Mallon wrote to Members to inform them of the legislative programme for the 2001-02 session. To date, one Bill has received Royal Assent and two are awaiting it. A further two Bills have completed, or are about to complete, Committee Stage. It had been hoped that more Bills would have been introduced into the Assembly by this stage of the session. Ministers are examining what can be done to expedite matters. However, a great deal of pre-introduction work has already been carried out, particularly in Committees, on the development of legislation for the programme. As a result of that, we anticipate that five new Bills will be introduced before the end of the month.

There are other points that need to be made in this regard. First of all, when comparing this Assembly with the Scottish Parliament or the Executive with the Scottish Executive, it should be noted that, in our case, the inter-party Government is based on statute. In Scotland, it is based on a voluntary coalition of the participating parties. A voluntary coalition involves the preparation of an agreed programme for government beforehand. In our circumstances, the preparation of a Programme for Government had to be agreed after the appointment of the Executive.

Under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, consultation is required of the Executive in relation to all matters that come before the House by way of proposals for legislation. Consultation has been much more extensive here than is normally the case, where a good deal of the debate and discussion of Bills takes place in the House. We have had a great deal of that

through our consultation process, and through Committee work, before Bills have come to the House.

In the current session, a Bill dealing with social security fraud has been enacted. Two Bills dealing with industrial development and the restructuring of IDB and LEDU, and a Bill on game preservation, have all passed their Final Stage. Two more are completing their Committee Stages. I submit to the House that the record of this Assembly and the Executive in terms of business undertaken is very creditable indeed.

Mr Speaker: I do not think that the Member or the House can complain that the Minister avoided the question.

Mr J Wilson: My question is a little more focused on the constituency of South Antrim. Will the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister consider holding a future meeting of the British-Irish Council in what is undoubtedly the most attractive of all constituencies in the United Kingdom, thus opening to a wider audience a perspective of South Antrim likely to assist in attracting new commercial investment and more tourist visitors?

Mr Haughey: I will make the views of the hon Member known to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and, through them, to the Executive. However, I cannot make any commitment on behalf of the Executive at this time.

Larne: Inter-community Relations

5. **Mr Beggs** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to give its assessment of work associated with improving inter-community relations in the borough of Larne since the involvement of the Central Community Relations Unit and the Northern Ireland Mediation Network in the area. (AQO 757/01)

Mr Nesbitt: What I previously said to Mr Dallat, I say also in the context of the Larne area. We would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere appreciation, and that of the Executive, for the effort and commitment of all those engaged in this initiative, and to assure them of our support in their endeavours on behalf of the entire community of Larne.

The Member will be aware that with the support of the Central Community Relations Unit, Larne District Partnership Board convened exploratory meetings with Larne Borough Council officials, the Community Relations Council and the Mediation Network to consider what could be done to improve community relations in the borough. As a result, proposals emerged for an initial consultative process to be taken forward by the Mediation Network. From this process, steps have been taken to establish a forum for social development with the aim of improving understanding in the community of Larne.

There have been three meetings of the forum with differing representations at each meeting. The meetings are co-ordinated, chaired and facilitated by the Mediation Network. During the initial meetings, the forum discussed the work that would need to be carried out; it also considered widening its membership. Consideration should also be given to having as balanced a group as possible representing gender, religion, age, rural and urban representation. Although time-consuming, the initiative and process to date have produced positive engagement with individuals representing key constituencies in the Larne area. It has obtained the strong support of Larne Borough Council.

The Mediation Network is engaged in discussions with a view to the forum's meeting again in early April 2002. It is hoped to elicit support from local public representatives to establish an even stronger core group of citizens around whom a longer-term forum can be established and, more importantly, sustained. At this point, it would be premature to produce a detailed assessment of the initiative. However, as with many things in this context — this applies to Mr Watson's and to Mr Dallat's questions among others — ultimately the key to improving relations in communities in any borough, urban or rural, lies in the hands of the people whom we are trying to facilitate. In this case they are the people and the elected representatives of Larne.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister acknowledge that improving local community infrastructure in areas where it is weak often plays an important role in improving community relations? Is his Department aware of the importance of sustaining such projects as Community Empowerment Larne?

Mr Nesbitt: We recognise the importance of empowerment — it is a phrase that is now in vogue — and capacity building to local people. The local community plays an important role in improving community relations. We accept that there is a weak community infrastructure in the Member's area. We hope that our work will lay a foundation upon which Larne — and other areas where there has been division and weakness in coming together — can build in order to facilitate their growing together as one community in future.

PFI/PPP: Alternative Funding Opportunities

6. **Mr McElduff** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister whether the Economic Policy Unit is exploring, in partnership with the Department of Finance and Personnel, alternative funding opportunities to PFI/PPP; and to make a statement.

(AQO 726/01)

Mr Haughey: A high-level working group, which is jointly chaired by the Economic Policy Unit in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First

Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel, was established in September 2001. It was established to fulfil our Programme for Government commitment to review opportunities for the use of private finance in all major service provision and infrastructure projects, to increase investment and to provide innovative and value for money solutions through public-private partnerships and private finance initiatives.

The working group includes representatives from the public, private and voluntary sectors and from trade unions. As part of the working group's deliberations, consideration is being given to alternative and complementary funding opportunities to public-private partnerships (PPP) that may redress the investment deficit in the infrastructure of our public services. Those include bond finance, user charging, asset sales and not-for-profit structures.

However, it must be recognised that the present public expenditure control regime, under which all the devolved Administrations operate, places certain constraints on the way in which funds for investment can be raised. For example, direct borrowing by publicly funded bodies cannot lead to any increased expenditure within the confines of the Northern Ireland departmental expenditure limit. The working group has planned to complete its review and submit a report to Ministers by the end of March.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. My question, following on from that, relates to alternative funding sources. The Minister and his office will be aware that at the time of the Good Friday negotiations —

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately, I regret that by putting his substantive parenthesis at the start, the Member has lost the time in which to make his supplementary question, because the 30 minutes are up.

3.00pm

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClelland] in the Chair)

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform Members that question 16, in the name of Mrs Annie Courtney, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

Transport Volume (Mid-Ulster Area)

1. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made in relation to public transport volume in the mid-Ulster area.
(AQO 746/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): The three Ulsterbus depots that provide most of the bus services in the mid-Ulster area are at Dungannon, Magherafelt and Omagh. During 2000-01, buses from these three depots provided almost five million passenger journeys. However, this volume shows a decline in the number of passenger journeys from the previous year. This is most disappointing, but similar to the long-term pattern of declining bus usage throughout Northern Ireland.

The rural transport fund operated by my Department currently supports three Ulsterbus routes in the mid-Ulster area. The fund also assists four local community partnerships to provide transport for people with reduced mobility in mid-Ulster. However, as the fund amounts to only £1.6 million this year to support rural transport services throughout Northern Ireland, the level of assistance that it can provide is obviously limited.

Mr Armstrong: In the light of the Minister's statement, does he not agree that the public transport infrastructure is insufficient in my constituency? In consequence, will the Minister further concede that isolated persons may pay similar amounts of road tax as others do, but for an inferior service, and that that is unacceptable?

Mr P Robinson: I accept that the present public transport system throughout Northern Ireland is unsatisfactory. That is why, in the regional transportation strategy that we are currently debating, there is a proposal to increase significantly the amount of public funding that is available. In that sense, mid-Ulster is not unique, although there are special problems with rural areas. However, the regional transportation strategy has identified a scheme for rural areas, and I hope that the hon Gentleman will read it and take it to his community for their comments as well.

Equality Impact Assessment (Antrim/Knockmore Line)

2. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made of the number of passengers using the Antrim/Knockmore line following the equality impact assessment carried out in November 2001.
(AQO 762/01)

Mr P Robinson: Based on figures gathered by Translink from May to November 2001, indications are that the patronage of rail services on the Antrim to Knockmore line is very low at less than 80 passenger journeys per day; that is 40 return journeys. At its reduced level of service Translink currently operates 30 weekday and seven weekend services on this line. I hope to issue the equality impact assessment on the proposed discontinuance of the line next week.

Mr Poots: Will the Minister say how much it costs, per annum, to run the Antrim to Knockmore line and what efforts he has made to secure the funding to maintain this line and not have it mothballed?

Mr P Robinson: I understand that the track maintenance for the line costs about £215,000 per annum, and the funding required is much more acute. If we have to maintain a service on the Antrim to Knockmore line beyond the life of the existing track bed, which I understand will probably be about three years in present circumstances, we will be talking about £13 million to replace that. We share train services between Antrim/Knockmore and the Antrim Bleach Green line. Full service on both lines would require another two trains involving a capital requirement of £19 million. In the 2000 spending review the Department for Regional Development sought funding to maintain the Antrim/Knockmore line; however, it was not granted, and the Assembly voted for a Budget that did not include the continuance of that line.

Water Shortages

3. **Mr Close** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will make a statement on projected water shortages in this calendar year. (AQO 734/01)

Water Supply in the South-East

17. **Mr M Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the water supply situation as a result of the lack of rainfall in the south-east of the Province. (AQO 743/01)

Mr P Robinson: With the Speaker's permission I shall take questions 3 and 17 together.

Impounding reservoirs in the north and west of the Province are almost full, and there are no concerns about the water supply in those areas. The Silent Valley reservoirs are much lower than normal due to the rainfall patterns during 2001, particularly between September and December when rainfall was only 58% of the average. At their lowest, the reservoirs fell to about 33% of their capacity. In February last year they were 97% full. However, the heavy rainfall over the past weeks, which can be identified with my ministerial statement, has improved the position. The reservoirs are now 50% full.

Mr Close: I am sure that the people of Northern Ireland will appreciate the irony of the Minister's reply, when, to use a colloquialism, it has been "bucketing heavens hard" today. In recent days, business premises and homes have been flooded due to the incessant rain. Will the Minister agree that the biggest part of the problem is his Department's lack of an effective leakage strategy? Further, will he confirm that up to 200 million litres of water a day are lost through leakage?

Is this not an iniquitous loss of a vital resource? What strategy will the Minister approve to reduce water leakage to a more realistic figure of about 10% to 15%?

Mr P Robinson: A day or two of heavy rain seems to give people the impression that the problem has disappeared. There has been significant rainfall over the past weeks, which coincides with my statement that the Department for Regional Development has a secret weapon to increase the volume of water in reservoirs. However, the water shortage is still with us. Last year at this time, the Silent Valley reservoirs were 97% full; at present they are 50% full. We need a sustained period of the Ulster weather that the Member referred to so that there will be no water shortage in the latter part of the summer.

The problem this year arises because of the unusually dry period and is not because of water leakage, which would have been consistent throughout the period. The Department for Regional Development does not automatically use the term "leakage" — we have, rather, "water that is unaccounted for". The distinction is that there are guesstimates as to how much water is used, because, although we know how much water leaves the reservoirs, we do not know exactly how much water our consumers receive because metering is not in place. The hon Gentleman is not, I am sure, advocating metering. An assessment is made about the consumers' usage, and that may or may not be consistent with the formula being used.

I do not deny that there is leakage. What else can be expected from our dated infrastructure? It is assessed that about 12 million litres of water a day are lost from the Silent Valley. That is equal to about 2.7 million gallons, which would fill many swimming pools, as the hon Gentleman will know. The Water Service maintains a large rural network of over 25,000 km of water mains that are of variable quality and age, some over 100 years old. That network contains about six million joints, all of which have the potential to leak. An estimated one fifth of the assumed leakage occurs through customers' pipe work.

There is a leakage strategy, and it is a departmental priority. Some £16.3 million has been spent on leakage reduction over the past three years, and a further £25 million will be spent in the next three years.

Mr M Robinson: Mr Deputy Speaker, in thanking the Minister for his initial responses, may I ask him to further detail what measures he has put in place to ensure that the situation does not deteriorate in the coming weeks and months?

Mr P Robinson: Because the reservoirs are keenly monitored, the Department was able to make an early call in response to the lower levels of water this year and to immediately implement a strategy to reduce the demand on the Silent Valley system. So far, that action

has reduced demand from the normal amount of about 143 megalitres a day to the current level of 113 megalitres a day. The Water Service achieved that by putting its drought management plan into action.

Bore holes have been created to provide additional supplies, and more water is being taken from Lough Neagh to the Belfast area. Additional water is also being provided from Lough Island Reavey, which is also in the Mourne, and from the Annalong River. A combination of those measures has already reduced demand on the Silent Valley reservoirs and can further reduce it by 30%.

On the one hand, measures are being taken to reduce the pressure on the Silent Valley supply, and on the other, the Department is alerting the public on how it can help, through its water efficiency plan. Simple measures include the use of the "Hippo bag", an item that I am happy to not demonstrate fully in the Chamber. It is a simple bag which, when filled with water and put in a cistern, reduces by about one third the amount of water used to flush a toilet. Measures to reduce considerably the amount of water that is used include turning off taps while cleaning teeth or washing; the hon Gentleman taking a shower instead of a bath — I am not sure what demand he makes on water supplies — and washing dishes only in fully loaded dishwashers.

The Department is doing its bit, and the consumer can help. More prayers for the good, wet Ulster weather can also see us through. It is to be hoped that we will not need to introduce any measures.

Mr O'Neill: Does the Minister agree that his statement and appeal to the public must have been remarkable, because it has barely stopped raining in the upper Mourne area since he made them? Can he apply those same semi-miraculous powers to solve the problems faced by the sheep farmers who have been denied grazing in that area?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's question is perhaps not directly related to the main question. Does the Minister care to answer it?

3.15 pm

Mr P Robinson: Perhaps it is relevant. Maybe the hon Member was suggesting that the sheep had drunk the water from the Silent Valley reservoirs. However, the Department has certain requirements on health standards. Members are aware of how dangerous cryptosporidium can be if it is introduced to a great extent. It is already present in water supplies, but not at a level that causes difficulties. Sheep that are around a reservoir catchment area would not help to keep that level down. That is one of the factors that the Department for Regional Development must take into consideration, and it always takes advice from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development on that.

Traffic Congestion (Sandyknowes Roundabout)

4. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Regional Development when he proposes to make further decisions regarding the congestion at Sandyknowes roundabout.
(AQO 750/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Roads Service is actively pursuing the investigation of options to alleviate the congestion experienced there during the morning peak period. It has commissioned a leading UK traffic consultant to undertake a major evaluation of the situation. Particular consideration has been given to two possible short-term options. These essentially involve controlling or limiting the number of vehicles permitted to enter the motorway system, thereby improving traffic flow on the main lines, and controlling the traffic speed on the motorway by introducing regulatory speed limits appropriate to traffic levels, thereby increasing the capacity of the system. These two concepts are used by road authorities in other countries, although their effectiveness depends on the complexity of the network in each case.

It must be recognised, however, that the real problem is that traffic demand at this interchange exceeds the existing road capacity. That is the case on many commuter routes during peak hours. It is likely, therefore, that significant improvements can be achieved only by a major scheme, probably involving an additional traffic lane from Sandyknowes to Greencastle. This aspect is also being considered by the consultant. His final report is due by the end of this month, and I hope to be able to make a statement on the Department's proposals in the spring.

Mr McClarty: Can the Minister assure the House that he is committed to providing an efficient road infrastructure for the key northern transport corridor, which includes the M2 and the A26 from Belfast to Coleraine, given the increasing congestion at Sandyknowes and given that more than 15,000 vehicles travel from Coleraine to Glarryford each day on a slow single carriageway?

Mr P Robinson: I accept fully the hon Member's remarks. That is a well-used stretch of carriageway. The M2 motorway at Sandyknowes carries over 60,000 vehicles a day. There is a significant area of development at the roundabout. Therefore, I am not convinced that the measures we are considering at present can do anything more than improve things in an interim capacity. A major scheme is required. The Department has looked at that area and has taken several steps over the past number of years to improve the situation. However, ultimately it will require a major scheme, and that major scheme will require funding.

Mr B Hutchinson: Anyone who listens to Seamus McKee, Wendy Austin and Conor Bradford presenting

'Good Morning Ulster', will know that Sandyknowes is not the only congested area. The traffic news is the same every day. There is also congestion on the Saintfield Road, at Tillysburn and on the Westlink at Broadway. Does the Minister plan to look at those areas as well, considering that he brought forward the transportation strategy and is committed to a 10-year plan?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that if a question is asked about a specific area, it is not in order to have a geographical round robin. That has been said before. However, if the Minister does care to answer, he may.

Mr P Robinson: Members will be able to go into detail on whatever issues they wish during the debate on the regional transportation strategy. However, those who listen to the traffic reports on 'Good Morning Ulster' will know that the Sandyknowes roundabout is frequently in the headlines in that section of the programme.

However, the Member is right to identify problems in several other areas. The Roads Service is always looking at how some busier sections of the road infrastructure can be improved. Undoubtedly, the regional transportation strategy will make many improvements. I recently met delegations from the Saintfield Road about the major problems in that area. Again, we are looking at what proposals can be brought forward to improve life for both motorists and residents in that area.

Mr Ford: I was a little disappointed that the Minister's response dwelt on the Roads Service. Given the difficulties in making any major improvements to the M2 and the Sandyknowes junction, is it not time that his Department expedited the building of a park-and-ride station to join the railway to the motorway at Ballymartin, a mile outside Templepatrick, thereby encouraging car drivers from Coleraine to switch to the train and avoid Sandyknowes altogether?

Mr P Robinson: Again, that matter is closely associated with the regional strategy. My best chance of convincing motorists that it is better for them to use trains is to improve the railway network and to ensure the availability of good trains and buses that provide good services.

People will not be encouraged to use public transportation, whether rail or bus, unless there is a good dependable service, particularly for people coming to work. That is why the regional transportation strategy identifies a significant increase in the amount of funds that will be available for public transport. Indeed, the amount of funds that has been spent in the past 10 years will be doubled over the next 10 years.

Omagh Wastewater Treatment Works

5. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the expected start and completion dates for

the construction of the proposed Omagh wastewater treatment works; and to make a statement. (AQO 748/01)

Mr P Robinson: Last January, we announced that the new wastewater treatment works for Omagh should be constructed at Mountjoy, and not on the site of the existing works at Hunter's Crescent. Considerable progress has been made with detailed studies to prepare for the construction of the works.

Preliminary land and planning investigations are ongoing, and the planning application will be submitted to the Planning Service later this month. Formal negotiations will begin shortly for the acquisition of land for the new works and access road. Subject to planning approval and completion of all land issues, it is expected that the contract for the design and construction of the new works will commence in October 2003. It will take two years to complete, and the estimated cost is £10 million.

Mr Byrne: Can the Minister assure me that the design process by Department for Regional Development officials is progressing? Can he also assure me that officials from the Department for Regional Development and the Department of the Environment will expedite the planning process?

Mr P Robinson: I recently visited the existing Omagh wastewater treatment works and spoke with the team in the area about the proposals. The Member probably already knows that they are as enthusiastic as he is to move to the new order. The design proposals are well advanced. The next major stage is the planning stage, which is being given a fair wind by Omagh District Council. I am sure that the Member will also support it.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is the Minister prepared to meet with residents' representatives in the Strathroy, Derry Road, Hunter's Crescent, Gortrush and Mountjoy areas of Omagh to listen to concerns about the relocation of the treatment works and how those matters can be approached?

Mr P Robinson: I understood that people in those areas welcomed the Department's proposal. If they have a concern, it is that the Department should get on with it as quickly as possible. We have taken some interim steps to ensure that some of their problems are dealt with. For example, when I was in the area, I was told of the flooding that can occur. As I understand it, more drainage tanks are being constructed so that the surrounding area does not have problems in times of heavy rainfall.

Interim steps are being taken to alleviate some of the area's problems. Ultimately, however, those problems will be better resolved when the Department can proceed with the wastewater treatment works at the new site.

Bangor to Belfast Railway Line

6. **Mr McFarland** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the progress and estimated

completion date for the re-lay of the Bangor to Belfast railway line. (AQO 735/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink advised that the Bangor to Craigavad line was re-laid and brought into service, with effect from 14 January this year. Work is now taking place on the line in the other direction, from Craigavad to Bangor. The track has been lifted, and drainage works are under way. Bottom ballast is being installed, and the track re-laying machine recommenced operation on 27 January.

Re-railing work is also taking place on both lines between Craigavad and Belfast. In addition, drainage works will have to be carried out on sections of the lines between Craigavad and Holywood. That work, together with the replacement of sleepers, is due to commence shortly. All work is due for completion in April 2002.

Mr McFarland: I understand that the whole project is behind schedule. Phase 1 is taking the same length of time as was estimated for the entire project, and it is not yet complete. Will the Minister comment on the potential costs of that overspend and the potential knock-on effects on other projects? Is he happy with Translink's management of the project?

Mr P Robinson: Taking the last point first, the original project managers have been replaced. I was not pleased that that was necessary. I ask the House not to press me too much on the matter, because legal issues arise from it, but that caused some of the delay. Secondly, the track re-laying machine arrived in Northern Ireland late. The machine came from the USA, obviously not by first-class post. Nonetheless, it is now doing the job. Thirdly, the main contractors encountered problems in the signalling work. I expect that there will be an overrun in costs, but we have been unable to ascertain the exact extent of that.

Northern Ireland Railways: New Rolling Stock

7. **Mr Hay** asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made in acquiring new rolling stock for Northern Ireland Railways. (AQO 712/01)

Mr P Robinson: The process of procuring new rolling stock for Northern Ireland Railways is nearing completion. That has been managed to date by a rolling stock steering group comprised of senior officials from Translink, the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company and my Department.

The steering group has been advised by professional consultants with expertise in train procurement. An independent panel of experts with industry-specific expertise has quality assured the procurement process. The rolling stock steering group has completed the

process of evaluating the tenders and will shortly make a recommendation to the board of the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company, which is responsible for awarding the contract.

The delivery dates for the new trains are still being discussed, but each of the 23 new train sets should be ready for scheduled passengers approximately six months after delivery, following a commissioning period by Northern Ireland Railways.

Mr Hay: The Minister is aware of the serious infrastructure problems in the whole of the Northern Ireland railway system. Can he assure us that as new trains arrive in Northern Ireland, the infrastructure and the system will also be improved?

Mr P Robinson: The responsibility for the operation falls to Translink. Members of the Committee for Regional Development will know that we are examining the structural issues involved in that.

3.30 pm

I was disappointed to learn that the tender negotiations showed that the date of the expected delivery appeared to be unrealistic. The Department has asked Translink and the Committee to determine what the new delivery date might be. Members will be disappointed by a delay, but the industry claims that the dates were unrealistic.

Mr Hussey: Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) seems to be concentrating on heavy rail. Is the Minister aware of any approaches or costing that NIR may have made for rolling stock for light rail?

Mr P Robinson: When I first took office, I faced a general view from the Northern Ireland Office that all railways in Northern Ireland would close. The Department has attempted to stop that by consolidating the core and building it up. I am not sure that there would be a ready funding response from the Department of Finance and Personnel for a light rail system. I have no doubt that, theoretically at least, Translink is looking at those matters. However, our immediate task is to build up the attractiveness of the core network that A D Little identified, encourage passengers on to those trains and, at that stage, attempt to enhance the overall network.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 16, in the name of Mr Barry McElduff, has been transferred to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and will receive a written answer.

River Corridors

1. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to legislate for and to promote

protected river corridors to ensure fishery interests are included in the planning process. (AQO 756/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster):

Legislation is not required for that purpose. Existing planning policy provides for the protection of river corridors and fishery interests where appropriate. Relevant planning policies can be found in the recently published regional development strategy for Northern Ireland, the planning strategy for rural Northern Ireland and in planning policy statement 2: planning and nature conservation.

The Department may also, through the development plan process, seek to control development along river corridors. During the preparation of a development plan, consultation with other Departments and agencies, district councils, local interests groups and the public often highlights specific areas where such policy protection is justified and should be considered. Each river corridor must be treated on its merits, and the Department could not sustain a blanket policy restricting all development in such areas.

If a specific planning application raised fishery interests, the Department would normally consult with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Depending on the nature and location of the development, consultation replies may also be requested from the Fisheries Conservancy Board, Foyle Fisheries in the Foyle catchment area, the water quality unit of the Environment and Heritage Service, the Rivers Agency, angling clubs in the locality and the leisure and inland waterways division of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Advice received would be taken into account before a final decision is taken on such applications.

In addition, my Colleague, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, advises me that, in the planning and execution of its drainage programme, that Department has a statutory duty to protect fishery interests.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his detailed reply. I raised the question in response to appeals — that seem to have fallen on deaf ears — from the Faughan Anglers' Association to the many agencies that the Minister mentioned. If the Minister visited the area, he would see that, due to the dumping of waste and sand extraction, the area around the Faughan River is similar to a lunar landscape. Does the Minister consider the planning policies that he outlined sufficient to protect the environment and the river corridors?

Mr Foster: I thank the Member for her question. All the aspects that she referred to are considered in any planning application. The Department considers all objective decisions and views of consultees, and it is aware of the need to protect the environment. However, if there are other more specific issues that the Member would like to refer to me, I would appreciate it if she were to write to me.

Mr K Robinson: Did the Department of the Environment contribute to the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee's inquiry into inland fisheries in Northern Ireland? Will the Minister undertake to consult with his ministerial Colleague to ensure that the tertiary treatment will operate in the new sewerage facility at Larne, thus protecting the interests of the local shellfishermen in Larne Lough and ensuring that high levels of water quality are achieved?

Mr Foster: As I said in my previous answer, we do, and will, take into consideration all the issues that affect people in the areas concerned — including the Larne area. During its inquiry into inland fisheries in Northern Ireland, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure made several recommendations that relate to the Department of the Environment. The Department responded fully to those. Officials have been invited to, and have agreed to attend, a meeting of the Committee to discuss the recommendations further.

Planning Applications: Backlog

2. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made on reducing the backlog of planning applications. (AQO 737/01)

Mr Foster: During 2000-01, the backlog was reduced by 17%, despite a rise in application numbers of 4.5%. Regrettably, by the end of December 2001, the initial reduction in the backlog had fallen to under 5%. There were several obstacles to progress during 2001. The impact of foot-and-mouth disease delayed the consideration of a substantial number of applications, and local government elections affected consultation arrangements with councils. Planning application numbers increased by a further 6%, representing more than 1,000 applications. If that level of increase were to be sustained, it would represent a 19% increase during the period 1999-2000 to 2001-02. The Planning Service is still recruiting and training new staff to deal with the increased workload. The number of planning decisions issued by the end of December 2001 is up by 3% on last year, despite the obstacles encountered earlier in the year. That increase represents 438 applications.

Mr Poots: I accept the validity of the reasons that the Minister outlined for the backlog not being cleared as quickly as it might have been. However, how many applications are outstanding after a period of six months, and how many are outstanding after a period of one year? Has the Minister set a new date for clearing the backlog of planning applications?

Mr Foster: The difficulties experienced in 2001 are, of course, disappointing. I will therefore be monitoring closely the progress that can be made by the end of the year. Much also depends on the increase in planning application numbers. I assure the Member that the

Department of the Environment will continue to do its best to reduce the backlog. At the end of December 2001, there were 656 planning applications in the system for the Lisburn district. Of those, 397 are regarded as backlog cases. However, that must be viewed against a 12% rise in application numbers in the Lisburn district. That increase represents 105 applications.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Could the backlog be made worse by the problems that some people face with planning applications for small businesses in rural areas under the Peace II and rural development programme funding?

Mr Foster: It is difficult to predict such issues. We take each application as it comes. We cannot be sure where applications will come from. However, I assure the Member that the process is under pressure. The economy is going so well in Northern Ireland that extra pressure is being put on us all. Sometimes we wonder if we are able to cope with all the applications. The Member raises an important issue that it is good to address. However, we cannot predict what planning applications will be made. We deal with them as they come, and each application is taken on its own merit.

Sewage Treatment Works (Dundrum)

3. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister of the Environment to give his assessment of the environmental impact of the sewage works at Dundrum on the condition of the Newcastle beach; and to make a statement.

(AQO 741/01)

Mr Foster: During the 2001 season, the bathing water at Newcastle failed to comply with the mandatory coliform bacteria standards of the EC Bathing Water Directive. The Environment and Heritage Service monitors bathing waters at 27 locations around the coast of Northern Ireland. The monitoring results for the 2001 bathing season showed that the bathing water at Murlough Bay, which is the closest monitoring site to inner Dundrum Bay, complied with the guideline coliform standards of the Directive. That clearly shows that the Dundrum waste water treatment works is not having an adverse environmental impact on Murlough Bay.

Given that Newcastle is over seven kilometres away, it seems unlikely that the works have any such impact on the bathing water at Newcastle. My officials consider that the failure of the bathing water at Newcastle to meet Directive standards is due to excessive discharges from the sewer overflows. Agriculture run-off and the frequent effluent from the Newcastle waste water treatment works may also be contributory factors.

Mr M Murphy: As the Minister is aware, Newcastle was not awarded blue flag status. Given the Minister's assessment, the damage done to the coast and the fact that Newcastle is one of the top three tourist destinations,

can the Minister assure us that he will assist Down District Council in its bid for blue flag status in the future? Furthermore, will he take into consideration the bad weather over the weekend and the damage caused to the seafront and the coast in the Newcastle, Killough, and Ardglass areas? Will he put in place the necessary infrastructure to repair this damage, and will he also support those whose homes were damaged by flooding over the weekend? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Foster: Some of the issues that the hon Member raised are not within my remit, so I cannot give him assurances on those matters. However, where responsibility lies with the Department of the Environment, we will take action accordingly. The waste water treatment works at Newcastle already has secondary treatment, and the effluent complied with the Urban Waste Water Directive's registered discharge standard in 2001.

However, there are major concerns about storm overflow discharges from both the works and the sewerage system. My Department has called for improvements to those systems to protect the bathing water in the future. The improvements to the Newcastle sewerage system will involve the Water Service carrying out an assessment of the performance of the system using a hydraulic sewer model. That model will be assessed against the current agreed guidelines for overflow discharges and improvements agreed to provide the required level of environmental protection.

Mr J Wilson: My question relates to the ongoing problem of waterway pollution and waste water treatment works. Will the Minister undertake to prepare a report on the number of pollution incidents on our waterways, and the number and nature of related fish kills in Northern Ireland during 2001?

Mr Foster: In 2001 there were 47 fish kills, in comparison with annual figures of around 40 in recent years. While I deplore all pollution incidents, especially those causing significant fish kills, it is encouraging that there has been a reduction of 27% in the number of medium- and high-severity pollution incidents, including fish kills, between 1996 and 2001.

An Environment and Heritage Service report on pollution incidents and prosecution statistics for 2001 is being prepared for publication in April. This report will be put on the Environment and Heritage Service web site.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I again remind Members to ensure that their supplementary questions are relevant to the oral questions.

Mr O'Neill: I hope that my question will be relevant. Does the Minister agree that the condition of the Newcastle beach has more to do with the Newcastle sewerage works than the Dundrum sewerage works and that its condition would be greatly improved if the

Minister for Regional Development brought forward the promised improvements to the Newcastle sewerage works? Can the Minister use his good offices to try to facilitate that?

3.45 pm

Mr Foster: I cannot answer on behalf of the Minister for Regional Development. The level of sewage discharges in that area needs to be examined. The results of that monitoring will be assessed according to the current guidelines for overflow discharges and improvements. The intention of the current guidelines is to seek improvement, and the Department of the Environment will do so within its remit.

The litter on Newcastle beach and its overall condition are, in the first instance, matters for Newry and Mourne District Council.

Water Framework Directive

4. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of the Environment if he will make a statement on the implementation of the Water Framework Directive. (AQO 720/01)

Mr Foster: The European Water Framework Directive came into force on 22 December 2000. It establishes a new, comprehensive system for the protection and improvement of Europe's water environment on the basis of river basin management plans. The aim of the Directive is to achieve a good status for all surface and ground waters throughout the European Union by 2015. It requires the development of a strategic managerial approach based on river basin districts. The provisions of the Directive are to be transposed into the national legislation of member states by the end of 2003. Further steps include an analysis of river basin characteristics, a review of the impact of human activity on surface and ground water, and an economic analysis of water used — all are to be completed by the end of 2004.

Responsibility for the implementation of the European Water Framework Directive in Northern Ireland lies with my Department and its agency, the Environment and Heritage Service. My Department has established a steering group, comprising representatives of the Northern Ireland Departments and agencies that are affected by the Directive, to assist in the process. My Department will publish this spring a first consultation paper on the implementation of the Directive in Northern Ireland. The paper will outline the Directive's provisions, and will invite views on its key issues as they affect Northern Ireland. I look forward to receiving comments on how to implement the Directive in a way that best suits Northern Ireland's needs and circumstances.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his complete response. We are all aware of the staffing and resources problems that the Department of the Environment has

suffered for several years, and which the Minister has tried to redress over the last couple of years. Can he assure us that he will have the necessary staff and financial resources to implement the necessary legislative change by next year and the necessary administrative changes by the year after, which would ensure that the targets are met and we do not lag behind?

Mr Foster: I assure Members of that, in so far as it is possible to do so. I have been successful in the last two Budgets in securing additional resources for the transposition and implementation of EU Directives relating to the environment. When the recruitment process is completed, my Department's environmental policy division will have increased from 34 to 64 staff, while the water quality unit and the Environment and Heritage Service will have grown from 37 to 74 staff. Those staffing increases need to be regarded in the context of the backlog of key Directives to be implemented and transposed, which I inherited from the time of direct rule. Together with the new Directives that have been introduced since devolution, including the Water Framework Directive, and imminent legislation, they create a daunting task for my officials.

In order to meet all the European requirements, I expect to bring some 40 to 50 pieces of environmental legislation before the Assembly over the next few years.

Mr Hussey: In my experience of the Foyle system — and the Minister will know this, given his experience of the Erne system — river systems do not necessarily recognise political boundaries. What plans is he making to implement the cross-border aspects of the Water Framework Directive?

Mr Foster: If a river basin district covers the territory of more than one European member state, the Water Framework Directive requires that that area be identified as an international river basin district. Member states are required to co-operate on the management of water quality in those shared districts through appropriate administrative arrangements.

As I said in my statement to the Assembly on 14 January, a joint working group on water quality has also been set up by the environment sector of the North/South Ministerial Council. Among other things, that will provide for the co-operative arrangements required by the Directive in respect of international river basin districts. The catchments of the Erne, Foyle, and Lough Neagh are shared with the South. As such, they must be included in international river basin districts under the terms of the Directive.

Ms Lewsley: What fines is the Department of the Environment paying at present because EU Directives have not been implemented, and what fines are pending?

Mr Foster: The Department prosecutes pollution offenders where the evidence permits. We seek the full recovery of our costs, including those of investigation and cleaning up waterways after pollution incidents. We liaise closely with the fishery authorities to ensure that those who cause fish kills also pay for restocking.

The fines levied by the courts are outside our control. The maximum fine for pollution offences is £20,000. The Department has conveyed the seriousness of water pollution offences to the Northern Ireland Court Service so that it can brief magistrates.

Driving Test Statistics

5. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail driving test pass/fail ratio statistics for the past 12-month period; and to make a statement.

(AQO 747/01)

Mr Foster: In the 12 months up to 31 December 2001, driving test pass rates were 52% for the normal "L" test for car drivers, 70% for motorcycles, 71% for buses and 54% for lorries.

The driving test in Northern Ireland is demanding. In 1999 it was updated to include more time on the road, driving on dual carriageways and other higher speed roads as well as a new approach to manoeuvres. New test marking procedures and other measures to enhance the quality and consistency of the test have also been introduced. Since 1999 rates have gradually reduced to present levels.

About 40,000 driving tests are conducted each year by my Department's Driver & Vehicle Testing Agency (DVTA). The quality of testing is monitored carefully and regularly in order to maintain consistency and high standards. During the past 10 years, two reviews of testing standards have been carried out in Northern Ireland by the Driving Standards Agency, and as a result of a recommendation by the Public Accounts Committee in November 2000 the DVTA agreed that such independent reviews should continue at five-year intervals. The next review is due in 2004.

Mr Armstrong: In the light of those figures, can the Minister assure the House that driving examiners, while ensuring that we have high-quality drivers, will not be allowed to fail candidates unnecessarily? Does the Minister agree that test examiners should be brought under greater scrutiny in order to ensure consistency and equality?

Mr Foster: In Great Britain, pass rates between the test centres vary from 17% to 72%, a spread of 55 percentage points. In Northern Ireland, the variation is from 40% to 65%, a spread of just 25 percentage points. Various factors produce minor differences on pass rates between centres, including road and traffic conditions and standards of instruction. However, procedures are

in place to monitor and supervise driving examiners to ensure that testing standards are consistent and appropriate. Driving examiners are thoroughly trained alongside Great Britain examiners, and their training is updated from time to time. Supervising examiners also regularly sit in on the tests to ensure that standards are maintained, and independent reviews of testing standards are conducted every five years. Every four years, the agency checks driving instructors to ensure that their techniques and abilities to give instructions meet the required standard.

Causeway Management Plan

6. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the terms and conditions of the Causeway management plan. (AQO 714/01)

Mr Foster: The Member should by now have received my reply to his letter, which was addressed to the permanent secretary. Included with that letter was an annex, which sets out in detail the aims of the management plan for that area of outstanding natural beauty. The aim is to establish a framework for the management of this landscape, particularly to conserve and improve the Giant's Causeway World Heritage Site. The plan is being prepared by consultants, overseen by my Department's Environment and Heritage Service. We have set up an advisory group of experts, assisted by a working group of local interests. The management plan is a non-statutory plan designed to deal with the whole range of visitor management and related issues that have an impact on this area. It is planned to publish an issues paper for consultation in March. That will be followed by a draft plan to be published in June, again for public consultation. A final plan is to be provided to the Department in November, and I expect to publish the agreed management plan in January 2003.

The management plan will also inform the statutory Northern area plan, which is being prepared by my Department's Planning Service. This latter plan will also be the subject of full public consultation as well as a public inquiry. I have taken the decision to give high priority to preparing the management plan in acknowledgement of the special qualities of the Causeway area and the pressures affecting it. My Department has prepared an information leaflet to provide further background on the plan to the public, and copies have been made available to Members.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I thank the Minister for his reply and his letter, which I received at the end of last week. Does the Minister agree that the Causeway area and the Glens of Antrim are among the most special and delightful parts of Northern Ireland? Will he confirm that the management plan will simply be advisory for this area and that a balanced voice will be given to private sector experts while the plan is being prepared? Will he also confirm that his Department will not

agree to the National Trust's call to vest the land that Moyle District Council is selling? Does he agree that nothing should be done that would give unfair advantage, promote their interests or frustrate the interests of others by those involved in the plan or the actions of the Department?

Mr Foster: I assure the Member generally that whatever takes place in the Causeway coast area will happen in an objective and impartial manner. There will be no advantage for any one person or group. The management plan referred to by Mr Paisley will be a non-statutory plan dealing with many issues outside the remit of the Planning Service but informing the area plan being prepared by that service. The plan will look at the issues surrounding the quality of the landscape of this area of outstanding natural beauty, the protection of the World Heritage Site and how some of those matters can be best translated into policy and action. The management plan will inform the preparation of the statutory area plan, and it will be for the Planning Service to address matters relating to building development through that statutory process.

Mr Leslie: Is the Minister aware of the considerable local concern about the pace and nature of development in the Causeway area of outstanding natural beauty and of the need for much stricter planning guidelines to protect this priceless scenic asset?

Mr Foster: As is everyone in Northern Ireland at this time, I am very much aware of the great concern that exists about the Causeway coast area in and around the Giant's Causeway, which is a World Heritage Site. I assure the House that, within my Department's remit, we will ensure that it will be zealously guarded and that anything that takes place there will be in keeping with the World Heritage Sites' values.

Ards and Down Area Plan

7. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of the Environment when the draft Ards and Down area plan will be published; and to make a statement. (AQO 711/01)

Mr Foster: Publication of the draft Ards and Down area plan is programmed in the Planning Service's current corporate and business plan for March 2002. However, it is now expected that the publication date will be May 2002. Notice of intention to prepare the Ards and Down area plan 2015 was published in March 1999. Initial research was carried out at the Planning Service's headquarters, and the divisional plan team was established in May 2000. Following publication of an issues paper in December 2000, several well-attended public meetings were held in January 2001. Following these meetings and other consultations, over 800 representations were received. Those will help inform the content of the draft plan to be published.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for a reply in which he has announced yet another delay in the publication of the Down and Ards plan. My interest is in Down particularly.

4.00 pm

Does the Minister agree that the current planning and decision-making process in County Down is based on the late 1980s and is woefully out of date, and that current development is being stymied by the fact that there has not been a review of planning restrictions and regulations in that area for 15 years? Development is taking place and development has also been restricted. The work of the Minister's Department, and that of many other offices involved in infrastructure development, is being hampered. Can he give a final guarantee that the new date of May 2002 is final, and that the plan will be published then?

Mr Foster: I know that Mr McGrady and other Members from that area are concerned. As far as it is possible to be absolute about anything, I can give an assurance that the plan will be published on the date stated. The old plan will remain of material consideration for any future planning until the new plan has become fruitful.

Mr Shannon: What steps have the Minister and his Department taken to encourage developers and builders to contribute to the local community through the area plan by providing roads, schools and so forth? Can the Minister confirm that the days when developers produced wall-to-wall houses have gone for good and that any applications they make must show a direct and positive contribution to the future life of the area? Will he also confirm that a balance between the equality initiative and social infrastructure is required?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Unfortunately, our time is up. I am sure that the Minister will give the Member a written answer.

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION STRATEGY

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly takes note of the proposed regional transportation strategy consultation paper published on 4 February 2002. — [*The Minister for Regional Development.*]

Mr Hay: Before Question Time, I was proposing that the Minister and his Department consider a separate transportation strategy for the north and west of the Province, especially for Londonderry. Londonderry has a population of 105,000 and a hinterland of another 200,000, making a total population of around 300,000.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members will please leave quietly, or continue their conversations outside the Chamber.

Mr Hay: The case has been well made not only by our council in Londonderry but also by many of the councils in the north-west of the Province. When the Committee for Regional Development visited our council area and talked to various council representatives from the north-west, a unique case was made for exploring a separate transportation strategy, similar to that in Belfast, for the north-west of the Province. As the document on transportation for the next 10 years is presented today, I appeal to the Minister to give that issue serious consideration.

Overall, the document is a good starting point. As we look forward to the next 10 years, I hope that we can envisage a transportation system for Northern Ireland that we can all be proud of.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla pointe a dhéanamh maidir leis an straitéis seo gan pointe ar bith a athrá atá déanta ag Comhaltaí eile cheana féin.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the continuing development of the regional transportation strategy. I will try not to repeat points that have already been made.

The Minister's foreword to the proposed regional transportation strategy states:

"Getting the balance right between competing transportation proprieties is a challenge for us all — especially since funding is finite and our current transportation assets are in poor condition following years of under-investment."

Following a recent visit to Europe, and having looked at some of the excellent public transportation networks, the Committee for Regional Development would find it easy to have an optimistic vision of a regional transportation strategy in this region. However, as the Minister's foreword identifies, funding is finite, so the strategy has to be earthed in reality in the light of the funding available and the funding that is likely to become available.

The years of underinvestment and the backlog of road maintenance will influence the percentage of funding allocated to roads as opposed to other forms of transport. Although some Assembly Members may wish to see a more adventurous regional transportation strategy, the strategy has to be based on where we are.

The strategy is based on assumed funding. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development has referred to a significant part of the total additional funding of £950 million over the next 10 years. A significant part of that amount is the £500 million that it is assumed will be available from an increase in baseline funding and/or from Executive programme funds. What is envisaged in the transportation strategy will be dependent on that.

Another significant part of the additional funding on which the strategy is based is £325 million from the private sector. While recognising that the Programme for Government identifies the need to find other sources of income apart from public spending, any acceptance of a private initiative, be it a public-private partnership, a design, build, finance and operate project or a system of bonds would have to be evaluated on an individual basis. Any decision to accept would be based on consideration of the short-term costs and benefits of each project and, indeed, the longer-term costs and benefits of any private finance initiative and the implications of that for public spending.

The developing strategy has advanced from the initial document, and it contains some outcomes and targets. The Committee pointed out that the regional transportation strategy should contain targets to enable implementation to be measured. I welcome the fact that the strategy has identified targets for pollution levels, increased usage of public transport, increased provision of public transport services, and accident reduction. Those can be found on page 25 of the summary document.

As the strategy continues to develop, targets will need to be identified for the increased use of alternative cleaner fuels and the increased use of cleaner vehicles and more energy-efficient and environmentally-friendly vehicles. As the strategy develops, it should also identify targets for the reduction of congestion and journey times on key transport corridors in the region.

In developing a regional transportation strategy, it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel. We can learn from experiences in other places, particularly in other European cities and rural areas. Although other transportation solutions may not be able to be transported to this region because of different circumstances and parameters, we need to take account of how good transport solutions have been achieved, particularly in some European urban areas. I will return, time permitting, to some of those issues.

The strategy states that there will be a sub-regional transport plan for areas outside the Belfast metropolitan area. A Member said that he would like a sub-regional plan for a particular region in the north-west. It may not be practical to have a sub-regional plan for the three cross-border regions. However, the Minister and the Department should take into account the submission made by the north-west cross-border group on the importance of the key transport corridors from Belfast to Derry, Monaghan to Omagh and Omagh to Derry — not just for Derry, Strabane and Limavady — but for the council region of Donegal in the South.

The Irish central border area network (ICBAN) also published a document on the importance of transportation to the economic development of its cross-border region, which includes Fermanagh, Armagh, Monaghan, Cavan and Leitrim. The east border region committee has also done work on economic development and on the requirements of transportation in that region. The views of those three groups should be taken into consideration when formulating the sub-regional plan for areas other than the Belfast metropolitan area.

A draft equality impact assessment has been carried out on the regional transportation strategy. However, given the importance of transportation to accessing health services and given the limited number of hospitals with acute services and accident and emergency services and their location, will the Minister comment on the health impact assessment of the regional transportation strategy?

There are some related initiatives to be carried out in association with the regional transportation strategy. Some of those initiatives include publishing strategic planning policy statements on transportation and land use, housing and settlements, retailing and town centres and the countryside. Transport cannot be separated from land use and planning. That is particularly important in large urban areas such as the Belfast metropolitan area. An essential part of any urban transportation plan must be the management of urban space. One of the major themes of the regional development strategy is integrating land use and transportation planning. Therefore the planning policy statements, particularly the transportation and land use statement, should form part of the regional transportation strategy. The regional development strategy of September 2001 states that it is an objective to have a modern, sustainable, safe transportation system that benefits society, the economy and the environment, and which actively contributes to social inclusion and to everyone's quality of life.

The Northern Ireland transport policy statement 'Moving Forward' also states that there should be a change signalled on the important step of developing a strategy to enable a move away from transport strategy dominated by car usage to a more balanced and integrated system in which public transport and non-motorised

transport will be attractive options for many trips. Both 'Shaping Our Future', of which the 'Regional Transportation Strategy' is the daughter document, and the 'Moving Forward' document agree.

4.15 pm

In relation to those objectives, I want to return to the European examples of good practice and transportation. There are a number of principles that are common to urban transportation strategy and policy. They are common to the European Commission Director-General's White Paper for energy and transport, and they are common to the International Association of Public Transport, which involves public transport authorities across the world. They are also common to the strategies of transport authorities in Europe, which have developed successful transportation systems. Those principles are: traffic congestion costs money; productive time is lost by people who spend more time travelling; commerce suffers from late and more expensive deliveries; and private car usage is not sustainable. Congestion and private car usage are not conducive to prosperous economic development.

Another principle that has been recognised and accepted within those policies is that cars take up space. There are a number of photographs — unfortunately I do not have them here — which made a comparison between the amount of space taken up on a road by four buses carrying 200 people as opposed to private cars carrying the same number of people with an occupancy of about 1.4 persons per vehicle. An accepted principle of those transportation strategies is that cars are not urban-space efficient, and it has also been identified that cars are not energy efficient.

In terms of environmental quality and the quality of life of people living in urban areas, public transportation is a much more acceptable form of transport than the private vehicle. Cars contribute to pollution; they contribute to noise levels; and they compare unfavourably with public transport alternatives.

In addition to those principles, there is the issue of social inclusion. The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development stated that 30% of households in the North do not have access to a private car, and the best way to achieve social inclusion, which is also an objective of the Programme for Government and the regional development strategy, is the promotion of a safe public transport system. The regional transportation strategy must take those principles on board as the strategy develops.

The experience in some European cities is that it can take 20 to 30 years to create a modal shift, particularly in large conurbations. It is not easy to change people's transport attitudes and habits. The regional transportation strategy covers a period of 10 years, and it is essential that as it develops, it enables

us to achieve a modal shift in transportation usage and a forward-looking and sustainable transportation system. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Ford: I welcome the Minister's statement and the initiation of the debate. Perhaps it is appropriate that we should welcome the fact that the Minister has seen fit to launch the report with a debate in the Assembly, even though it means that some of us are commenting having had only a brief opportunity to look through a fairly detailed paper. At least it shows that there is some recognition of the role of the Assembly — it was not announced to the BBC first. There are many issues in the strategy that will require detailed consideration not just between now and mid-April, the formal consultation period, but by the Assembly and various Committees over a longer period.

The primary issue seems to come down to funding. The Minister has detailed the money that has already been allocated and the additional money that has been identified as necessary. However, it is clear that even those sums will not be adequate to provide the quality public transport service that we require together with the improvements that also appear to be required by certain roads. The Assembly must address the problem of Treasury funding.

The Minister identified £80 million from developers' contributions. I hope that that sort of money can be extracted. The Minister and his Colleague, the Minister of the Environment, may have left it too late to obtain realistic sums. We are already overloaded with out-of-town shopping centres and out-of-town industrial estates, which have created many of our transport problems, yet no contribution will be made. Recently, Belfast City Airport's terminal building was rebuilt, and yet there was no developer's contribution to provide a link to the railway line, which runs about 30 yards away. Thinking along these lines is much needed, and I hope that the Minister can make something of it.

It is the Minister's expectation that the private sector will contribute £325 million. That kind of money would make a difference, yet there is no indication as to how it can be obtained. I have seen examples where PPPs add significantly to public goods in those areas where there is a semi-commercial activity. Mr Deputy Speaker, you and I know that the Antrim town centre development is a classic example. However, in many cases it is questionable that PPPs can deliver the necessary public goods for a public service. The document does not contain much detail as to how that will be dealt with.

Bonds receive a brief and passing mention, but this is an issue that has to be addressed by the Assembly. Will the Minister explain more about bonds in his winding-up speech? It is as if the issue was mentioned and immediately dropped when someone whispered "Watch out for the Treasury — look what happened to

Ken Livingstone." There is no doubt that bonds played their part in New York and could also have played a part in Mr Kiley's plans for London Transport. It may be that the Assembly could consider bonds as a suitable way to raise funds that are not otherwise available.

There are a couple of points that have not been mentioned. It appears that 10% of people walk to work. There is one way in which the regional transportation strategy could tie into the regional development strategy. Will we allow massively increasing suburbanisation? Today's increasingly smaller families would accept homes near to jobs in a way that the traditional mum, dad and 2·4 children would not — they wish to live in the suburbs. That could be considered as a strategic development issue. Let us not assume that walking is what people do at either end of a car journey.

Although a good national cycle network is proposed for Northern Ireland, very little of it is providing people with the opportunity to undertake urban journeys in safety. It is good to know that there is a cycle network along the north coast from Portrush to Portstewart, and, on a good day, it might even tempt some of us to use it. However, that is not meeting the transportation needs in our urban areas.

The Minister will be disappointed if I do not dwell at length on railways, especially since there is a suggestion in the report that some MLAs and community groups will bitterly oppose any retrenchment on the railway system. Yes, Minister, we most certainly will. The Knockmore railway line is not functioning properly because it has three badly timed services a day, but that does not mean that some of us do not see it as a major opportunity for public transport services in that area. There is population growth in all the villages along the line, as well as in Antrim and Lisburn at each end. The Dublin Area Rapid Transport system (DART), which is a straight line, has been referred to. In Belfast we have the opportunity for a circle line, serving the growing villages of Crumlin, Glenavy and Ballinderry, and also those along the northern loop such as Templepatrick, Ballyclare and Mossley. It would be crazy to allow a facility like that to disappear in the short term when it could provide such good opportunities in the long term.

It is disappointing to see that a great question mark remains over the main part of the railway structure outside the immediate suburban area. The line from Ballymena to Derry is under threat, as is the line to Larne. We have already seen problems with the Bangor line, but at least it will be retained. Surely lessons were learnt in the 1960s, that every time an arm is chopped off a railway system, it becomes harder to attract passengers on to the core lines of the system, because the input of passengers is reduced? The system is greater than the sum of its parts.

Surely the rail issue requires a closer examination. The entire rail system should be examined and, in particular, the issue of the integration of rail services with bus facilities or car parks at either end to attract passengers away from cars. As I said earlier, a Templepatrick park-and-ride station to get people from Coleraine off the M2 seems a far better solution to the strategic problems of travelling from the north than to build an additional lane on the M2, where there is no room for it. Those problems are still there and still require significant funding. However, railways will require less funding than that we anticipate devoting to roads in congested urban areas.

There are other areas of disappointment. I draw the Minister's attention to a map in the regional development strategy that purports to show urban areas. It shows places such as Kilkeel and Comber — which are undoubtedly of great importance to Members from south Down and Strangford — but not Antrim, which according to the regional transportation strategy is a major growth town. Perhaps if we decided what the urban areas are, it would help us when discussing urban matters.

There is no way that we will deal with the problems of excessive road traffic without grasping the nettle of congestion and parking charges. However, there is no mention of how we are to deal with it in relation to out-of-town shopping centres, for example. If we start charging for congestion in town centres, but fail to address the problems of out-of-town shopping centres with acres of car parks, we will merely drive whatever life there is left in town centres out into the country. That must be seen as detrimental on environmental grounds. Undoubtedly, the most efficient public transport systems are those which bring people into the centre of a conurbation, not those that disperse people around ring roads to shop in the sort of developments that have grown up recently.

The reference to a rapid transport pilot is to be welcomed. However, is it not scandalous, and probably a situation that is unique to Belfast, that the Comber rail line has an interesting variety of trees growing on it, but it makes no contribution to the public transport needs of east Belfast? It could relieve congestion on the Newtownards Road as a guided bus route.

Why have Translink's proposals for a quality bus corridor to take buses away from the most congested areas of the Saintfield and Ormeau Roads come to nothing? Why is Belfast the only city in Europe that can manage to be so poor?

There is a fleeting reference to the — yes, Minister, I give way.

Mr P Robinson: If the Member wishes to know what happened to that plan, he should ask his Alliance Party colleagues in Castlereagh Borough Council who opposed it.

Mr Ford: I presume that, since the Minister is alleging that Alliance councillors opposed the plan, it would be a good incentive for a DUP Minister to carry it forward. I thank him for that.

The report acknowledges the findings of the Environment Committee's report on school transport. It is a major report, and serious funding from the Department of the Environment is required to address the issues. That money has not been forthcoming. I acknowledge that that is not the fault of the Department for Regional Development. However, it is clearly an issue that we cannot cope with the needs of school transport in a regional development strategy if we do not examine the issues that arise and the Department of the Environment's response to them. It may be the case that the timescale will not permit that to be addressed properly. There is a certain lack of joined-up government between the two arms of what used to be the Department of the Environment.

The report highlights a need for private sector funding. It is not solely a commercial issue in some areas. I hope the Minister will tell us how he will introduce measures such as a public service obligation if he is seeking to go down the line of private funding, because it is not there.

Although the report contains some of the right buzzwords, the financial provision seems to be focused on a predominantly roads-based system. There is no alternative to such a system in rural areas. It will be some time before some of the railway lines in the west of the Province are recreated, if ever.

4.30 pm

Although a roads-based system might be appropriate in rural areas and in the more dispersed west, it is not so in Greater Belfast and in many larger towns. The M1, the M2, the Saintfield Road and the Sydenham bypass will be unable to cope with the current demands unless there is a major improvement in public transport. The equality and environmental aspects of the policy require such improvement. I welcome the publication of the report. However, I hope that during the consultation there will be a further shift of emphasis towards provision that better serves the needs of the entire community, not just car users.

Ms Morrice: First and foremost, the opening vision statement of the report,

“to have a modern, sustainable, safe transportation system.”

must be changed in order to get the priorities right. The aim should be to have “a safe, modern, sustainable transportation system”. Road safety must be the first priority of the regional transportation strategy. The Assembly must address the fact that Northern Ireland has the highest road traffic accident rates in the UK. More people have been killed in road traffic accidents

in Northern Ireland than have been killed during the troubles. As stated in the report, in Northern Ireland there are over 10 road deaths per 100,000 of the population, by comparison with five to six deaths per 100,000 in England. The rate in Northern Ireland is almost twice the UK average. According to Prof David Begg, chairperson of the UK Commission for Integrated Transport, a key test of the strategy's success would be whether Northern Ireland's accident rate were to drop to the UK average by the end of the 10-year period. If that has not happened, the strategy should be judged a failure.

What shocked me from the outset was that the document sets no specific targets for a reduction in the number of accidents or casualties. It states that its aim is to contribute and, wherever possible, to demonstrate progress towards the achievement of long-term road casualty reduction targets. It states that that will be set in the Northern Ireland road safety strategic plan. What about joined-up government? A diagram on page 69 of the report, which I find quite shocking, suggests that there could be a reduction in road traffic accidents. The bar graph shows what the accident reduction rate could be if the strategy is implemented. In ten years the number of accidents could be reduced by 5%. That would bring Northern Ireland nowhere near the UK average — it is abysmal.

Pages 106 and 107 outline the safety aspects and provide a breakdown of the gains to be derived from certain actions. If the Department for Regional Development introduced accident remedial works on 25 sites, traffic management schemes that could prevent 30 accidents per year, structural maintenance, et cetera, the savings could be £950 million over the ten-year period. How much additional funding does the Department seek? The answer is £950 million. The savings are outlined in the document. The Department simply has to invest more money in measures to reduce accidents, casualties and deaths on the roads and it will have its money. Is that too simple? It is not rocket science.

Much time and energy has been spent on finding sources of additional funding — the Executive, European funding, developers, or public-private partnerships.

The two paragraphs on road safety state that there are 12,000 road traffic casualties per year in Northern Ireland, at the cost of £450 million to the economy per year. If road traffic accidents, casualties and deaths were reduced, it would not mean that the £450 million would go straight back into the Treasury — of course not. However, if a focus on reducing accidents saved even £90 million per year in emergency services — fire brigade, ambulance, health and medical costs — it would be a gain. It is far too simple.

Why are we beating our breasts about where the money will come from when it is already there in the document? Admittedly, a big problem is that hospital

fees, doctors' fees and ambulance costs all go to a different Department. However, when the Minister is making his bid for money for the strategy, can he not explain to the Executive that money will be saved in those areas by focusing on reducing accidents?

A 5% reduction in accidents is referred to. I have talked about the cost to the economy. What about the cost of human suffering? That should be taken into account even more. The strategy is going absolutely nowhere unless it makes a far bigger dent in the road accident, casualty and death rates in Northern Ireland and, at the very least, brings them into line with the UK averages.

There are many ways to fund the strategy. Let us start by getting people off the roads. Every intervention today called for more investment in public transport and pointed out that the allocation of 65% of funds to the road network and 35% to public transport is wrong. If the figures were reversed, we might get somewhere. People will get off the roads and on to the trains and buses, which will start to reduce road accidents and also make a cleaner, greener environment. This is not rocket science — it is very simple.

What about the wonderful Safer Routes to Schools pilot schemes? Instead of piloting them, why are they not introduced for real? Home zones should also be introduced, instead of being piloted. A pilot scheme is not needed to prove that those things work. Money should be spent on those schemes. Traffic management and traffic calming can also save money and lives. That should be the priority.

I have concentrated on road safety because it is, and should be, a priority. However, I compliment the document on issues such as accessibility to buses. Targets have been set for Citybus and Ulsterbus to introduce 100% accessibility to buses for the disabled. Could that not be extended to the rail system? The Omnibus Travel Club campaigns for accessibility to buses. That organisation's valuable work should be highlighted and used as a model.

The need to invest more in public transport rather than roads has been mentioned. On radio this morning, Lisa Fagan from Friends of the Earth lucidly pointed out that 30% of households in Northern Ireland do not have access to a car and that in Belfast the figure rises to around 50%. Are those figures not taken into account when the strategies are being written? What is happening?

The Minister repeated the objectives set out in the opening paragraphs of the document; I shall do likewise. The first is environmental impact — more money for public transport would benefit the environment. Another objective was to improve safety. Accessibility was another —

“to improve access to facilities for those without a car and to reduce severance.”

I assume that that is integration between Departments. I simply ask the Minister to put his money where his mouth is. Four of those objectives could be achieved if he listened, changed his priorities and put much more investment into public transport rather than into roads. That would reduce accidents and would create a cleaner, greener environment. I am glad that the Minister asks us only to “take note” of the report. Judging by today’s debate, I suspect that few of us could have supported a motion asking us to approve this document. Put safety first, Minister. Put safety first — then come back to us.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, you are aware that the Speaker put no time limit on the first round of speakers. However, so many Members wish to speak that I must impose a time limit of five minutes. I must also issue a health warning that even with the five-minute limit it may not be possible to call everyone.

Mr Byrne: I congratulate the Minister for moving the motion and for providing us with an opportunity to assess critically the Department for Regional Development’s proposed 10-year transportation strategy. It is fair to say that the regional transportation strategy must complement the regional development strategy and enable its realisation. Transport investment has been badly neglected for decades. For many years there has been no funding in either rail or road. In the western area there is a backlog of roads maintenance, amounting to almost £40 million of the £120 million total cost.

Northern Ireland as a European region, and as a region in this island, can have a proper modern transport system only if it is integrated into those wider systems. I welcome the recognition of the European context in the regional transportation strategy, but there must be a stronger collaboration with the Republic of Ireland.

Equality of treatment across Northern Ireland is a priority for the Assembly, and that is recognised in the Programme for Government. For a long time, I have said that balanced regional development can be pursued only if transport investment is targeted in particular transport modes and across the region, in urban and in rural areas. Past transport planning and investment neglect must be reversed.

Many of us who travel to work in Belfast, even to Parliament Buildings, recognise the congestion in the Greater Belfast area. There is daily evidence that that is the biggest single problem, given the high car usage. In many of our rural areas road transport is the only mode of transport. There is no railway other than the lines from Belfast to Derry, Bangor and Carrickfergus. The high-speed Belfast to Dublin Enterprise train demonstrates what can happen with proper investment in a modern rail transport system.

To have modern transport there must be investment. The real challenge is that £950 million will be needed

over the next 10 years to supplement the planned expenditure on transport. There has been much discussion on public-private partnerships, and they have been criticised, but the Executive must seriously examine alternative means of securing funding. My party and I believe in investment in public services, but it seems almost impossible to obtain the necessary investment in transport.

4.45 pm

I would like the Minister and the Department to seriously consider the good work that the three cross-border local authority networks have done. In the past ten years, the eastern border counties body, the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) and the North-West Region Cross-Border Group have completed several transport studies.

In particular, it is important to get investment in both rail and road transport in order to develop the north-west region successfully. Living in a constituency that does not contain one mile of motorway, I see daily the handicap that that constitutes to the business community and the commuter.

In order to successfully develop the region from east to west and from north to south, we must target investment in transport. Other Members referred to over-dependency on car transport. Over 90% of passenger kilometres in Northern Ireland are attributed to car transport; this is out of kilter with our efforts to achieve a sustainable transport system.

I welcome the take-note debate and hope that further consultation will lead to an improved transport system.

Mr Hussey: I give a general welcome to the proposed regional transport strategy, and I thank the Minister and the departmental officials for its production. The decision to grasp the nettle of addressing the issue of prolonged underinvestment in our transport infrastructure is long overdue. We must hope that we can quickly advance the consultation process to the final strategy and begin its much needed implementation. Much has been said by the Chairperson, the Deputy Chairperson and other Committee members, and I support their input to the debate.

The proposed areas of spending in the total regional transport strategy funding level are a fair reflection of our population base as shown in the Belfast metropolitan area and other urban and rural areas, with the regional strategy transport network rightly seen as overarching.

Given the much higher level of metres per head of population for road infrastructure in rural areas, the Minister will be aware of my concern about appropriate funding provision for roads maintenance in those areas. I seek his assurance that that factor is adequately provided for in the proposed strategy.

The funding split between transport modes will continue to be the catalyst for discussion both in and beyond the House. I am concerned about the modal emphasis, particularly in the Belfast metropolitan area and other urban areas.

Reference has been made to the Committee for Regional Development's fact-finding mission to mainland Europe. I found the visit an intensive and valuable exercise, and thank the Committee staff for their excellent organisation and the service that they provided for the Members involved. The results of the Committee's investigation will contribute to the consultation process, and, I trust, be taken on board by the Minister and the Department.

I am convinced that the modal split, particularly in the Greater Belfast area, must take cognisance of European developments in the use of light rail, tramways, buses and heavy rail in a fully integrated way. It must utilise the most efficient mode for the population density and topography in the area.

To encourage modal shift, such an integrated system will require other ancillary actions such as the provision of park-and-ride facilities; shared terminals; integrated ticketing and timetabling; clearway routes; and financial incentives — or perhaps disincentives.

With regard to funding for rural areas, I support the commitment to improve the highway system, particularly the road maintenance and strategic highway improvements. However, will the Minister consider working towards dual carriageway status for all the key transport corridors within the rural strategic transport network? Given the dependence on the roads network for freight distribution, particularly in the west, such a commitment is vital for the economic success of the entire region. Unlike Ms Morrice, I welcome the recognition in section 6.21 of the summary that

“The private car plays an important and dominant role in rural areas and the Proposed Strategy acknowledges that this will continue for the foreseeable future.”

I remind Members that buses also use these roads. The ability of people to travel in rural areas must be improved. While I welcome the proposed increase in investment in rural bus services, I am still to be convinced that the strategy is enough.

In conclusion, section 8.2 of the summary reminds us that

“The transport plans will present a programme of initiatives that will be implemented over the 10-year period in support of the objectives and targets in the RTS”.

However, note the health warning that this will happen

“subject to the availability of resources.”

I trust that the Executive and the Assembly will note fully the document before the House and ensure that

the final regional transportation strategy receives the necessary resources to enable its full implementation.

Mr M Robinson: I would like to begin by congratulating the Minister and the Department for Regional Development on the proposed regional transportation strategy. Extensive research has been carried out to identify fully the different transport needs of society. The document is unique in that it distinguishes between urban and rural areas in the Province. It also looks at the Belfast metropolitan area as a separate entity. That is an extremely important basis for the document as those different areas experience transport problems which are unique to them. For example, someone living in the Belfast area experiences problems such as congestion and limited parking in Belfast city centre, whereas someone living in a rural area complains of a lack of public transport services or the poor condition of the roads. The strategy goes a long way towards addressing the complex transportation issues which Northern Ireland faces now and in the future. It is a very positive document, which examines in great detail the methods by which we can achieve a transport system that we can be proud of.

Transport issues affect everyone who lives and works in Northern Ireland, which is why this strategy is of relevance to the entire population. The proposed strategy is also very timely, as it looks at what can be achieved over the next 10 years and puts forward innovative measures to meet those goals.

Northern Ireland has the lowest roads expenditure in the UK. The level of funding for public transport has been insufficient, and this has led to a highly under-developed transport system and a road infrastructure that is crying out for investment. Urgent action on roads and public transport infrastructure and services is required if we are to prevent further deterioration.

Research has shown that there is an over-reliance here on road-based transport, with the car being the favourite mode of transport. The document has taken this fact and examined various methods by which we can move away from a transport system that is dominated by car use to a much more balanced and integrated system. That is not to say that this strategy ignores car use or the road network; in fact, it does quite the opposite. The document highlights the reality that the road network is of prime importance to the functioning of Northern Ireland. We have an extensive road network — it totals some 25,000 km. The document does not neglect the fact that roads are the dominant mode of internal transport here, accounting for 96% of passenger traffic.

Research, which was carried out to form this strategy, has shown that roads are of high importance to the public. It is a fact that most people want to see better road maintenance and the building of new roads and bypasses. This is hardly surprising, given a report

by the Northern Ireland Audit Office on the structural maintenance of roads which noted a need to double the current maintenance budget in order to address the backlog which totals £120 million.

I would like to turn my focus to the public transport system in Northern Ireland. Our public transport system, mainly due to a combination of underfunding and the increase in use of the private car, has declined to an all-time low level. Unfortunately, due to this lack of expenditure we have been unable to make much needed improvements, which is why we have inadequate facilities and an old bus fleet. The average age of a bus in Northern Ireland is around 12 years old, which is unbelievable, given that the most innovative buses are in fact manufactured some 30 miles away, in Ballymena.

The availability of bus services has also been slowly declining, and frequencies on some routes operated by Ulsterbus and Citybus have decreased, leading to a year-on-year reduction in route kilometres. Research has shown that if we are to get car users to switch to public transport, then improvements to the public transport system are required urgently. Certain criteria must be achieved. People want to see an efficient and reliable service that offers value for money, and improved and increased routes which can reach some of the most isolated communities. Research has also shown that if people were within reasonable walking distance of a bus stop, they would be more inclined to use public transport.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like most of the Members, I regret that we have only five minutes each in which to speak, but I will make the best of it.

The document contains a great deal of information and gives us a lot to work with. I have not been able to examine it in any great detail, but I am sure that I will be able to do so over time. The overarching objectives of the proposed regional development strategy are promoting a strong economy, protecting the environment and developing a more inclusive society. Achievement of those objectives depends very much on investment and where that investment is placed. Of course, there have been decades of underspending and underinvestment west of the Bann, and I wonder if this strategy will be any different from those we have had in the past.

People who live in rural areas have few options. This strategy, like others, seems to point towards most of the funding ending up in Belfast or the Greater Belfast area. As a consequence, rural areas will suffer. If the Belfast metropolitan plan is to be carried out to its fullest extent, those plans to push for movement on the rail issue will suck up much of the funding — albeit that those plans are worthwhile. Therefore, the fact that there are fewer options for those in rural areas will mean that a great deal of funding will disappear into those other areas and away from the rural areas

west of the Bann. The roads there are poor, maintenance is a problem, and it seems that the budget will not alleviate that problem in the long or medium term.

Improving public transport is the best way forward. Thirty per cent of people have no car; 50% of people in Belfast have no access to a car. Those are fairly significant figures that must be taken into account. However, there are difficulties with implementing the strategy. At the moment, public transport is underused. On the main routes into Stormont in the morning, you could sit beside a bus lane for well over half an hour and not one bus would pass — and if one did, it would probably only have one or two passengers on board. We talk about value for money and the changes that will take place in the coming years. Any changes will be costly if we continue to use resources, such as bus lanes, as we have been doing. That will also encourage people to continue their love affair with the motor car — something that we have probably picked up from the Americans.

5.00 pm

With regard to people cycling to work, at present there is not sufficient room on most roads to allow bicycles plus cars to travel without creating tailbacks, and there are consequential risks to cyclists. We have all this to grapple with, and it is not going to be easy. There is a need to get people out of their cars, and the Belfast metropolitan area is probably one of the first areas where we should make a move on that. People go from Belfast to Lisburn and vice versa, and it does not make much sense if there is one person to a car and tailbacks to and from Saintfield.

The strong push for rail is correct in its overall thrust, but it works against rural areas. Rural areas do not have that option, and, as far as we are concerned, value for money comes into the equation. Ninety-five per cent of deliveries of heavy freight are by road, and the doubling of road freight is causing more problems on the roads. The past strategy certainly had no vision for extending the rail network to Portadown, Armagh, Monaghan, Omagh, Strabane and Derry. Heavy vehicles have an impact on the ability to improve road safety, and it is vital to reduce the number of lorries and overloading. Recently the A4 has had a spate of fatal accidents, and passing bays or slow lanes for agricultural vehicles are the sort of thing we are looking for to reduce the death toll on that road and many other key roads in the area. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Bradley: I was on the fact-finding group that visited Europe last week, and, as the Deputy Chairperson stated, our eyes were opened by the co-ordination and management in place there. If we started tomorrow morning, it would be 25 years before we could even hope to achieve anything near what they have.

I welcome the document, which is the result of co-operation between the Minister, his officials and the Committee. We worked long and hard on this, and on some page or other Committee members will see their personal input reflected. I certainly welcome the publication.

Almost everyone who has spoken has made reference to the rural situation and the problems of rural transportation in the proposed strategy, and I also wish to make some comments on that. No individual section of rural society can be singled out as suffering more than another by the unavailability of proper rural transport. However, those who would benefit most from such a provision include senior citizens who, for a variety of reasons, cannot provide personal transport, young people who have limited financial resources or are too young to own or drive a vehicle and rural mothers and housewives stranded in their homes all day if the family cars are required by their spouses to get to and from work.

Recently we have heard from other Committees, and in Question Time, about targeting social need and equality for all citizens. Only a fully acceptable regional transportation strategy will provide a level of equality for rural and isolated communities which will match, or come close to matching, the service available to their urban counterparts. I suppose parity of esteem is another phrase I could use, with everyone being equal.

I want to concentrate on the A1, an old hobby horse of mine. It is somewhat ironic that the last day we spoke on the regional transportation strategy, we recorded the death that morning of a French lady killed on that very road. This morning another death occurred on the same road between Newry and the border. I welcome the series of maps in the consultation paper which at least displays an acknowledgement of the pending and long overdue upgrading of the A1 route between Loughbrickland and the border at Killeen. Perhaps I am being a bit selfish here, but I would be more pleased if a section or a chapter, or even a sentence, had been devoted to the Euro-route. For decades we have been told by bureaucrats, senior officials and high-profile elected representatives of the importance of the development of a Euro-route to service the eastern seaboard of the island and to run between the key ports of Larne and Rosslare.

I welcome the stage that the proposals have reached, and I call on the Minister to assure the Assembly and, more importantly, local people, commuters and the haulage industry that delays will not be allowed to interfere with the strategy and its planned programme for the A1.

I do not intend to introduce any additional points regarding the A1 and its place in the strategy at this stage. However, I call on the Minister and his officials

to initiate a further plan in an effort to upgrade the route to motorway status soon.

If we are to become fully integrated Europeans, enjoying the same quality of life as our fellow Europeans, it is only right to expect that the drive time for the 100-mile trip between Dublin and Belfast should be similar to that over the same distance on the roads of France, Germany or Italy.

I also seek an assurance from the Minister that every euro outside Peace II and INTERREG is made available to the regional transportation project, and that he will demand that the powers that be at Westminster will draw down funds from Brussels, which are there for the asking, but which can be obtained only through the Chancellor's office. Are we losing out on EU funding because of the Chancellor's inaction? I want to emphasise the need to get work started on the A1 — tomorrow morning if possible. I can make no more urgent plea than that.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the regional transportation strategy; it is vital for Northern Ireland's economic and social well-being, and travelling methods are crucial to the success of industry, agriculture and tourism. Further investment is necessary across the board, but rural areas have been neglected for far too long — no wonder that people in Belfast cannot find their way into the country.

I invited some businessmen to the Cookstown area. At the end of the motorway they were completely lost, and one man said that he could travel no further on such a road and that he wanted to go home.

As a Member for Mid Ulster — which has no rail network and a limited bus service — I bring it home to the Assembly that services in rural areas are more in need of improvement than those anywhere else. Thirty per cent of the people do not have a car at their disposal. Mid Ulster is a major rural area, and there is no excuse for a limited service.

It has been said that Mid Ulster does not have a road that even looks like a motorway let alone a railway line, yet people from Mid Ulster are expected to travel to work in Belfast. We are disadvantaged when it comes to road transport. School buses can travel on many rural roads; therefore, the same roads should also be accessible to public transport. If that is not financially viable, public transport and school buses should be combined in order to facilitate those going to school or travelling to work.

In rural areas schoolchildren often have no way to get home if they cannot travel on the school bus; therefore, they may lose out on beneficial after-school activities.

Someone has to pay for good public transport, and a toll system on specialised roads and bridges has been

suggested. A community transport system is being promoted in the Cookstown area. The hire of a bus costs 10 pence a mile plus the price of the driver.

Does the Minister agree that Belfast International Airport is the most important route to transport goods from the Province to other parts of the world? However, does it have a railway station to convey passengers to other destinations? No, it does not. There is no other country in the Western World with an airport of that calibre without that facility. The prospect of Lisburn becoming a city is another factor that must be taken into account.

Since this is a 10-year plan, which is unlikely to be completed for 25 years if funding is not available, an airport line would be a vital addition to the railway network. However, there are cost implications, but to be without improved transport for another 10 or 25 years would be cutting off one's nose to spite one's face. We must not allow all our railway lines be closed in one fell swoop.

Northern Ireland is growing and evolving, and we must develop our transport system in advance so that we do not hold back our industries, our tourist potential and the general economic and social well-being and safety of our people. In this computer age, new ideas are coming forth daily. Let us not look at the impossible, and let us avoid the short-sightedness that could restrict our development of Northern Ireland as an area which exports people for their expertise and imports them for leisure. I hope that now that we have a devolved Government, all the concerns of rural people will be considered as well as those of people living in cities.

Mr Shannon: I welcome the regional transportation strategy. I want to put on record my thanks to the Minister and his Department for the provision of the Comber bypass, which is an integral part of the regional strategy. After 28 years of campaigning for it, it is a welcome decision in that area.

I want to focus on one aspect of the regional transportation strategy: public transport and its accessibility, specifically in my constituency of Strangford, which is a rural area. The number of constituents who come into the advice centre in Newtownards to complain about the bus service is staggering. Translink is a business and must operate as such, but customer satisfaction is what keeps them in business.

Let me illustrate this. One of my constituents, an elderly lady in her eighties, lives in a rural townland down the Ards Peninsula and regularly caught the bus at 9.10 am for a doctor's appointment in Newtownards. One morning the bus did not arrive. There was no indication that it would not come. Again we find that this public transport company failed to let its customers know of its plans. Customer satisfaction has been the fall-down. We were told that there were too few people

using that particular service to sustain its viability, but its removal and the way that it was done left that pensioner stuck for two hours on a cold January morning until the next bus arrived.

That is not the only example. A university student informed me that it was cheaper for him to pay upwards of £200 a month for a car than to have the hassle and expense of using public transport. That is contrary to what we are trying to achieve in the regional transportation strategy. He complained that he had to get a bus and two trains to attend university in Jordanstown. That could take up to two hours each way. He spent four hours travelling during the day; he could have used that time more effectively for study, or by earning the money to study.

It is ridiculous that trains and buses have been slower for some in the past year than they were 40 years ago. That student indicated that he is not the only student with that predicament. He said that many students found that getting themselves deeper into debt by buying a car was better than relying on public transport where there were delays and hold-ups, such as having to sit around a station for 20 minutes because of leaves on the track. That is one example. Students could miss lectures and connecting buses. It is already hard for them to revise and to complete their dissertations and essays without adding two to four hours of travel into the equation. We must consider that when we are talking about a regional transportation strategy. It must be workable, accessible and on time, so that people can get to important appointments with their doctors; so that students are not spending a fortune in money and time trying to get to class; and so that pensioners and young mothers are not stranded because they live in a hamlet and not a large town.

There has been one bright spot in relation to public transportation — the community transport schemes, such as Peninsula Community Transport Ltd scheme based in Strangford, which the Department for Regional Development has helped to fund. Two doctors who recognised the huge shortfall in transportation needs for local communities — whether to get to the doctor, to take disabled children out for the day, or even for rural families to get their weekly shopping — initiated these organisations. That has been successful.

With population growth, the shortfall between transportation and transportation needs is increasing. For example, in September I had parents queuing up to complain that the school buses were dangerously oversubscribed. Some parents had to send their children to school even earlier so that they arrived there safely. Problems such as these will continue to grow over the years as the population increases. In the Newtownards district, the population has increased by 22.2%. District population in the whole of the borough has increased by 26.3%.

Newtownards has good potential for further development in transport using the former Belfast to Comber railway line — the E-way, as many people know it. That idea should be taken on board, and perhaps the Minister could examine it. Rural transport needs to be accountable to the environment, and that is why it needs to work with the Roads Service. The state of the roads is of concern both to the businesses and residents of the area. Erosion of the roadside has become a huge problem in rural areas. Cars and lorries are getting bigger, but the roads have not changed in 50 years. The lorries and cars are taking away some of the banks and grass areas, and that has to be looked at in the overall strategy.

5.15 pm

The Strangford area is famed for its beauty, but that has been marred by the inadequacy of the public transport provision and the quality of the road network. If public transport is not funded correctly, it will continue to fail to deliver on its commitment. The needs of a rural community can be met only when a satisfactory system is in place, and only then will the number of people using public transport increase.

Mr Gallagher: Like other Members, I welcome some parts of the report. However, the section of the report that deals with rural roads and communities will not tackle the real problems. That section needs to be revisited, and more work needs to be done on it. I will explain why.

The report addresses the issues of tackling marginalisation and ending isolation. Accessing homes in many rural communities depends on private roadways, and in some cases, many miles of private roadways. Some of those roadways are substandard and in a very bad state of repair. The residents in those isolated areas include the elderly and the disabled, and I presume that the report is referring to those people.

However, when those people go to the Department for Regional Development to ask for help with their roads, they are quickly told to go away and that there will not be any help for them. They are told that they do not meet the criteria. I know some of those people, and I am sure that other Members do also. Those people then try to access money from some of the Peace programmes. They put in their applications, and there is a great deal of merit in those applications. However, the funding bodies divert those applications to the appropriate Government Department — in the case of roads, to the Department for Regional Development. Its answer is, “No, sorry. There is no way that funding should be diverted to that cause, no matter how needy.” The Department’s reason is that the proposals do not meet its criteria.

The report addresses the needs of rural communities, and at the same time criteria are being applied to them, the criteria that the Department for Regional Development

applies to a multimillion-pound housing development in a large town. The requirements are a road at least four and a half metres wide, a footpath and this and that, plus several coats of tarmac. After that, people can come back and the Department might consider matters further. That whole area needs to be revisited. As long as the Department continues to use those criteria, it will ensure that the very people that it is paying lip-service to in this document will continue to be marginalised and isolated.

I know of several communities that have applied for funding — not to the Department for Regional Development, but to Europe or some other body — and invariably they receive that response. When the applications are referred to the Department for Regional Development, it says that they cannot be approved. All that those communities want in the twenty-first century is basic access to their houses. We have the Department’s criteria, supposedly for rural communities, but they are applied to the multimillion-pound developers. There is something illogical, unfair and not quite right in the way that the Department deals with rural communities.

I am happy that the Minister is present at the debate. The point that I highlighted will be a key element in tackling the transport needs of those who live in isolated areas. The money will be available for that purpose at no cost to the Department for Regional Development, because it is derived from the peace and reconciliation fund. Many of the areas that I referred to are cross-community — those who live there share the same roads, and they want to be able to drive or walk along them safely without having to negotiate deep puddles of water, as has been the case in recent weeks. I hope that a means of applying sensible and appropriate criteria to rural communities can be found.

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful to Members for their contributions, and I will try to respond to as many of them as possible. I will respond in writing to those that I do not get the opportunity to refer to. I also hope to make some personal observations on the matter as one elected representative to others.

When I opened the debate, I said that I wanted to thank certain key individuals, and I mentioned the Committee for Regional Development. I wish to record my appreciation of some of those who have been engaged in the preparation of the proposed strategy.

I have been involved in elected politics for over a quarter of a century. During most of that period, I have been on the other side of the counter. I have met and locked horns with Government Ministers and their officials. Members will not be surprised to learn that I have often played an adversarial role, and sometimes an almost combative one. In doing so, there is a tendency not to appreciate the calibre of the public

servants who service our democratic institutions. One of the most valuable experiences I have had as a Minister is to get to know the army of dedicated officials who passionately labour to improve services and provision for everyone in Northern Ireland. I heard the comment of the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, and I know that he and his Committee members, who have spent countless hours in the company of those same people, will share my assessment.

In today's context, I want to commend, in particular, the key officials who were involved in the preparation of the proposed strategy. I hope that Members will agree that they have provided an excellent document for the consideration of the House and the public. It would also be appropriate to mention the panel of experts who provided specialist advice for their contribution. I thank Prof David Begg, Mr David Lock, Prof Austin Smyth and Mr Stephen Kingon. I also express my gratitude to Mrs Joan Whiteside, the chairperson of the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, who worked alongside the panel, and the Department's specialist adviser.

When I moved into the Department for Regional Development, I, like every other elected representative, had a sense of the shortcomings of the infrastructure in the Province. However, during my first-day briefings, I was shocked to see the audit of our roads, transport, water and sewerage infrastructures. I learnt of the scale of the massive underfunding that there has been, and of the shortfall in the provision that we need. That is the appalling legacy of direct rule.

I spent the early part of my tenure in office highlighting the need for additional funding for that infrastructure. I am glad to say that over that period there has been a growing recognition of that need. That is not surprising, because under devolution we are governed by a group of people who live in Northern Ireland, who get reactions from people in Northern Ireland, and who know the roads and transportation needs.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

A start has been made on additional funding. Trains have already been mentioned — £103 million was allocated as a result of the AD Little review. One of the key elements has been the recognition by the Department of Finance and Personnel, and the statement by the then Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mark Durkan, that roads and transport were up there alongside health and education as priorities for Northern Ireland public expenditure.

It was right for him to reach that conclusion, and it was proper for him to say it. It is all the more proper as it starts to feed its way into the public expenditure programme. However, it was not enough to have an idea of what was wrong. Therefore, this strategy forms

an essential part of the way forward. I call it more than a vision. Undoubtedly it looks 10 years ahead to what things could be like, but it also maps out the way forward and recognises the hard lessons that have to be learnt.

Money is needed. Many Members have said that we have to pay for these improvements and that we have to get the money from somewhere. We have tried to make a realistic assessment of the funds that will be necessary to do the job and the shortfall that we can expect if we extrapolate public expenditure over 10 years. We have looked at how we can raise the shortfall of £950 million.

In many ways it is more than a vision; it is a vision with legs. It is a strategy with a way forward showing how it can take us through to the goals that it has laid out. I emphasise that this is not the strategy — it is a proposed strategy. It is there for consultation; it is there to hear what Members have to say. It is there to hear what the public has to say, and I will be interested to hear the Regional Development Committee's views, particularly in the light of their European experience, which the Chairperson mentioned. I look forward to hearing some of the lessons that they have learnt in Europe and how they may be applied to Northern Ireland.

We have a very good consultation document that I hope will initiate a debate. I hope that it will be an informed debate, because I suspect that at least one of today's speeches was made without having reference to the hard work of reading the document. If I get a chance, I will come to that in due course.

I will respond to some of the individual issues that were raised. I commend the Committee for the positive role that it has played, and the Chairperson referred to the great challenge of securing the £950 million. On pages 26 and 27 of the report you will see the consequences of not finding the money, and that was the hardest lesson that I had to learn. Those two pages picture the bleakest backcloth that one could imagine about the prospects for Northern Ireland on the basis of things continuing as they are with the present level of funding.

Among the 12 points that are laid out on pages 26 and 27: there will be very heavy congestion almost leading to gridlock; the roads infrastructure will be in an even worse state of maintenance as the backlog grows; there will be poorer services on public transport — even poorer than exist at present. That is the menu, not if people cut back on expenditure, but if it remains the same. That will be the future for Northern Ireland if we do not do anything in addition to what we have at present.

That is why the Chairperson is right to refer to the great challenge of getting that other £950 million and how essential it is for Northern Ireland. He is right to say that our economy will benefit from better trans-

portation, and he is also right to talk about the health benefits of fewer accidents. I will read the correct figures, and not those that were imparted by the Member for North Down, Ms Morrice, who seems to prefer to look at the diagram on page 69 rather than the one on page 127.

If she were to look at the diagram on page 127, she might pour a little less ridicule on the statistics.

5.30 pm

A number of Members, not least the Chairperson, raised the importance of the north-west. I believe that we will hear much from the north-west lobby over the next weeks and months. We have one regional transportation strategy, and, as was indicated, transportation plans will flow from that. In whatever scenario we go forward, we will be paying close attention to the needs of the north-west. 'Shaping Our Future' recognises the importance of the north-west, and its daughter document, 'Regional Transportation Strategy', will also do that. Whether that means a separate plan that will look at the transportation needs of the north-west or whether they will be incorporated into the wider network is a matter that we will leave for discussion over the coming weeks.

The Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee made reference to the under-utilisation of European funding. He is right that, in diagrammatical form in the document, we do draw attention to the £10 million that could come from European funding to make up the whole of the £950 million additional funds. However, while we have identified that £10 million, which was principally sourced through the Peace II and INTERREG III programmes, there is a further £52.3 million, which is perhaps somewhat hidden in the document. It is in the building sustainable prosperity European programme, which is additional to the UK nationally and is anticipated in public expenditure baselines.

Reference was made to rail freight. Unlike Europe where there is considerable potential for rail freight, Northern Ireland's potential is somewhat limited because the distances involved are quite small. Distances of well over 200 miles are needed to make rail financially viable. Less than one quarter of 1% of freight moving into or out of Northern Ireland is by rail, so we have to consider the size of Northern Ireland and the limitations that come as a result of that.

I want to make reference to the comments made by the Deputy Chairperson, Mr McFarland. He also had the experience of the European findings. I look forward to hearing of his experiences and seeing to what extent we can incorporate his ideas, through the consultation process, into any full strategy that comes forward. He referred to congestion tolling; I do not wish to be the person to experiment with these things. We have to get it right here. Other people are learning lessons, and

many people in Northern Ireland might prefer that they go through that more painful experience and that we learn the lessons from them. It does not form an essential part of the £950 million. If money can come from that source, clearly it can take some of the pressure off other areas that need some of the £950 million or allow us to have a surplus and a supplementary aspect to the regional transportation strategy.

Mr McFarland also made reference to the Executive programme funds. Our proposals in this regard are realistic. The Executive programme funds may not live for the whole 10 years, and if they do not, the money will — and some of us believe that this is the right thing anyway — go back to the Departments and lift the level of the amount that would come to the Department for those purposes. Based upon what the Executive have released in the past, the £500 million of Executive programme funds is a realistic target for us, and I hope we can bring that about.

I want to move on to my Colleague, the Member for Foyle, Mr Hay. He referred to the historic under-funding that there has been and the difficulties in rural settings. I was glad to hear at least one Member of the House indicate that if we had an adequate public transportation service, the Member would use it.

It is to be hoped that we can do that. Much of the debate has been about the balance that must be struck. When some Members sat down I got the impression that they felt that public transport would be good for other people and that that would make life easier on the roads for them. We must change the whole culture of public transport. We have not done that. One Member suggested that it might take 20 to 30 years to make the modal shift. That is probably right. Northern Ireland is holding back on the shift towards public transportation because of its heavy reliance on motor cars. The statistics on the increase in licensed vehicles over the last decade show us out in front with 31%, while Scotland has 19%, England has 16% and Wales has 14%.

The challenge facing us is huge, but the proposed strategy provides a blueprint to enable us to take a significant and vital step to achieving our goals. It will also provide the basis for delivering a transportation system fit for the twenty-first century.

It seems that the Department's evaluation of the £325 million that might come from the private sector was thought to be unrealistic. The experience and achievement in Great Britain were taken into account, and we can achieve that figure.

In roads and transport Northern Ireland is capital intensive in the provision of our bus fleet and trains and in relation to roads. Our infrastructure is high in capital expenditure. The room for private sector initiatives, such as private finance initiatives, is all the greater, and I have a dedicated division — dedicated,

in every sense — within the Department considering what is possible. We will want to consider these issues with the Committee for Regional Development.

Many Members expressed a feeling that the way in which we are treating rural dwellers is harsh. One Member for Mid Ulster, Mr Armstrong, who is not present, stressed that the Department was almost discriminating in favour of the Belfast area. I draw his attention to page 50 of the regional transportation strategy document, which looks at the funding for the four areas — the regional strategic transport network, the Belfast metropolitan area, the other urban areas and the rural areas. The pie chart shows that the rural areas have 33% of the funding, which is the highest of the four slices. The Belfast metropolitan area is receiving only 24%. It is important to recognise that there are considerable problems in rural areas, such as roads maintenance. It is intended that a high proportion of the expenditure on roads maintenance will go to rural areas, which will benefit all people living in rural Northern Ireland.

Mr Ford indicated that the £80 million of developer contributions might be coming too late. We are where we are now, and I was not in the Department for Regional Development 10 years ago when it would have been nice to have got money out of developers. It is not simply commercial development that we are talking about. The regional development strategy shows that there is a significant house-build programme. The figure of £80 million takes account of that. If we can supplement that figure with funding from commercial developers, we will be in an even stronger position.

I have not forgotten about the importance of walking and cycling in the context of the transportation strategy. About 5% of additional funding is allocated to walking and cycling, and about 3% of the total proposed strategy expenditure will be for walking and cycling. They are as important as other modes of transport.

I assure Mr Ford that I have not forgotten about the importance of railways. However, the key issue is that we were facing the inevitable closure of Northern Ireland's railway network. Undoubtedly, had devolution not come to Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Office and the Government would have taken that step. The Dublin to Belfast line might have been spared, but there would certainly have been nothing left north of Ballymena. The Whitehead line and the line from Antrim to Knockmore would have been closed. Therefore, it was important for the Department to consolidate the rail network to ensure that it could be saved and given a real chance to be part of the future of public transportation.

The AD Little report gave us options. The Executive chose the option of consolidation for funding. The idea is to consolidate the rail network around a core, build it up, make it viable and attractive, put new trains on it

and ensure good service. We want to persuade the Member for Foyle to leave his car behind and get the train to Belfast, where, it is to be hoped, one of his Colleagues will collect him from the station if he does not wish to get on a bus. We have that opportunity, and we have funding in place for 23 new train sets. We can show people what it is possible to do with the railways. If they can be built up and made more attractive to other people besides the Member for Foyle, we could examine the options of enhancing and expanding the network. The right thing to do is to concentrate on the core and make it attractive in the hope of reversing the decline of the rail network.

This strategy has been called a roads-based system. It is easy for people to say that the Department should put more money into public transport rather than roads. I want to give the House some statistics — not to bamboozle, but to inform the debate. Public transport accounts for about 4% of use at present. However, 16% of the Department's budget is for public transport. That indicates considerable recognition of the issue by the Department at present. Under the proposed strategy, the percentage will be increased to 32%, which means that twice the current percentage of funding will be available for public transport.

It would be nice if everybody, except those for whom the car is essential, would use public transport. That is not possible. It will take a long time to effect that modal shift and get people away from viewing the car as an extension to the home. The first step is to offer them an attractive alternative. We could use a big stick and threaten people with tolls and congestion and parking charges. However, the Department recognises the need to make a major start to the strategy by increasing public transport funding from 16% to 32%. It constitutes recognition that there must be a push towards public transport. Many Members mentioned the space that is taken up on the road by four buses, by comparison with 100 cars — one did so in graphic terms. That point illustrates how public transport contributes to alleviating roads congestion.

5.45 pm

One of the first statistics that I obtained when I took up ministerial office was that within 20 years the number of vehicles on the roads will have doubled unless there is a push towards public transport. Anybody who travels on the Saintfield Road or through the Sandyknowes roundabout will recognise how the state of Northern Ireland's transportation system would be affected by a doubling of traffic levels.

I realise that I am running out of time. However, I will reflect on the responses that I received in the House today, and on the further responses that I will get from the Committee for Regional Development and the public during the next 10 weeks, before formulating

the final draft for the Assembly's consideration. I hope that I will have done so before the summer recess. I commend the proposed strategy to the House and to the people that we all serve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the Proposed Regional Transportation Strategy Consultation paper published on 4 February 2002.

ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Resolved:

That Mr Francie Molloy replace Mr Mitchel McLaughlin on the Committee for the Environment. — *[Mr C Murphy.]*

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Resolved:

That Mr Mick Murphy replace Mr Francie Molloy on the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. — *[Mr C Murphy.]*

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE

Resolved:

That Mr John Kelly replace Mr Barry Mc Elduff on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. — *[Mr C Murphy.]*

ASSEMBLY STANDING ORDERS

Mr Speaker: There are two motions to amend Standing Orders. I propose to conduct one debate only, because both motions are on the same issue. I shall call the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures to move the first motion. If the House wishes, the debate will take place on both motions. When those who wish to speak have done so, I will call the Chairperson to make his winding-up speech, if necessary. I will put the Question on the first motion before asking the Chairperson to formally move the second motion, putting it to the House without debate.

I remind the House that because the motions relate to changes to Standing Orders they require cross-community support. If the necessary support is apparent, that might be provided simply by a collection of voices.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy): I beg to move

That in Standing Order 48, delete “Statutory” from the title and in line 3, delete “Statutory”; and in Standing Order 31 (2) line 4, delete all after “otherwise” and insert:

“and the provisions of this Standing Order and of Standing Order 33 shall apply in relation to the Committee of the Centre acting by virtue of this paragraph as they apply in relation to a Statutory Committee.”

Both motions to amend Standing Orders are linked. Therefore I will speak on them together. The purpose of the first amendment is to close a gap in the Standing Order that relates to circumstances in which business falls to more than one Committee. Standing Order 48, as it is currently drafted, contains two provisions that relate to the overlap of Committee business. The first part states that where there is an overlap of business, the Chairpersons of the affected Committees will consult with one another and agree on which Committee should take the lead on the subject under consideration. The second part provides that if the two Committees cannot reach an agreement, the matter will be referred to the Business Committee for arbitration. However, the Standing Order, as presently drafted, is not as specific as it should be, because provisions apply only to Statutory Committees and not to Standing Committees. For example, because of its cross-cutting remit, the Committee of the Centre regularly seeks the views of other Committees that may have input into matters that it is considering. Similarly, other Statutory Committees seek the views of the Committee of the Centre.

In theory, however, the present wording of Standing Order 48 provides that a Statutory Committee is under no obligation to consult the Committee of the Centre on any matter other than legislation. Conversely, of course, the Committee of the Centre is under no obligation to consult other Statutory Committees on matters other than proposed legislation.

Fortunately, the practice to date has been one of full co-operation. However, the Committee of the Centre

felt that it would be beneficial to close the loophole so that in the event, however unlikely, of a disagreement there would be a procedure in place to resolve it. Therefore the Committee of the Centre asked the Committee on Procedures to consider the issue.

On doing that, the Committee on Procedures then agreed that, rather than simply make reference to the Committee of the Centre in Standing Order 48, the provisions of the Standing Orders should be made applicable to all Committees. The Committee agreed that that could be done through a minor amendment to Standing Order 48 by removing the word “Statutory” in the Standing Order.

The change will mean that, when there is an overlap in business between any type of Committee, the Committees will, as a matter of course, seek the views of the other affected Committee or Committees before coming to a decision on the matter. Similarly, the Business Committee will arbitrate if there is a point of dispute.

As a result of that minor change, a consequential change will also be required to Standing Order 31(2), which provides that, in relation to any proposed legislation where there is an overlapping remit, the provisions of Standing Order 48 will apply to the Committee of the Centre. The proposed change to Standing Order 48 will make that reference unnecessary.

On the second motion, the Committee agreed that the changes to Standing Order 48 would require a change to the Committee section of Standing Orders. I emphasise that that is a presentational change, and therefore there are no changes to the wording of the Standing Orders in that section. The proposed restructuring, as set out in the Order Paper, will ensure that the Standing Orders appear in a more logical fashion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That in Standing Order 48, delete “Statutory” from the title and in line 3, delete “Statutory”; and in Standing Order 31(2) line 4, delete all after “otherwise” and insert:

“and the provisions of this Standing Order and of Standing Order 33 shall apply in relation to the Committee of the Centre acting by virtue of this paragraph as they apply in relation to a Statutory Committee.”

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 48-54 and 56-59 be renumbered so that:

49 becomes 48
53 becomes 49
54 becomes 50
56 becomes 51
57 becomes 52
58 becomes 53
59 becomes 54
50 becomes 56
51 becomes 57
52 becomes 58
48 becomes 59 — [Mr C Murphy.]

Adjourned at 5.53 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 11 February 2002

The Assembly met at noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

HRH THE PRINCESS MARGARET, COUNTESS OF SNOWDON

Mr Speaker: It is my sad duty to advise the House of the death on Saturday past, 9 February, of Her Royal Highness The Princess Margaret, Countess of Snowdon. As Speaker, I have written today to Her Majesty The Queen to express condolences to her, to Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother and to the whole of the Royal Family on their sad loss.

As a token of our respect, I propose that all business be postponed and that the House do now, by leave, suspend for one hour, resuming the business at 1.00 pm. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.03 pm.

On resuming —

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

1.00 pm

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like to ask you to explain to the House why, in the past, the House stood in silence for people and then commented on their passing — we had the deaths of the First Minister of Scotland, a journalist and a postal worker — and yet on the death of the only sister of the reigning monarch of the United Kingdom, it did not stand in silence to observe her passing? Can you assure me that it was not because of threats from certain Members of the House that, if that took place, they would see to it that they would be seated and would not take part in such a thing? Can you also explain to us why the Union flag is not flying at half mast on the Building today?

Mr Speaker: First of all, there was of course the death of one individual that was commemorated here, to which I think the Member did not refer. That is the death of a Member, Mr Tom Benson. As I recall, although I stand open to correction as ever, the deaths to which the Member referred were not all dealt with in the same way. In the case of Mr Benson and the First Minister of Scotland, I believe that there was a motion that was spoken to. In the other cases, I believe, there was a short period of silence. It does not seem appropriate that the passing of Her Royal Highness The Princess Margaret should be commemorated in exactly the same way, but rather in a different way. That has been done by the suspension of the House.

The second question that the Member asked was whether there was any threat, and I am sure that he means was it conveyed to me in any way — not just by word of mouth or in writing — and the answer is that there was not. No one spoke to me or raised the question with me. I try to use my best judgement to be the servant of the House, but no one raised any such questions.

The third question that the Member raised was on the flying of the flag. I enquired on Saturday morning as to whether there were any flag orders from the palace. I was advised that that was not the case. Subsequently, I made enquiries with the Parliaments in Westminster and Edinburgh, the Assembly in Wales and the Parliament in Dublin, none of which had made any decisions, but all were considering the matter this morning. I gave instruction that, if there was an order, the flag should fly at half mast, but, if there was not, that understanding from the palace should also be accepted.

It is my understanding that it is intended that the flag will fly at half mast throughout the country on the

day of the funeral, which I understand to be Friday 15 February at St George's Chapel. That is why the flag is not flying at half mast today. However, I expect there to be an order in respect of Friday 15 February, when the flag will fly at half mast.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. Hansard reports that the House observed two minutes' silence when the First Minister of Scotland died.

Mr Speaker: I believe that a motion was tabled on that occasion.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: That is correct.

Mr Speaker: That is the point I am making. The matter has been given some consideration. All deaths are in some way the same; that is one of the great levellers. However, there is another sense in which not all deaths have precisely the same meaning, and so they are handled differently. The Member will also notice, since I think he has Hansard to hand — and this may not be so well known to members of the public — that in certain circumstances a black border surrounds the relevant pages and, earlier this morning, I gave instructions that that should be done today.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that Royal Assent has been signified to the Industrial Development Act (Northern Ireland) 2002. The Act became law on 7 February 2002.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Suspension of Standing Orders

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly suspends Standing Order 10(2) and Standing Order 10(6) for Monday 11 February 2002. — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel.*]

SUPPLY RESOLUTIONS:

SPRING SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES (2001-02) AND VOTE ON ACCOUNT (2002-03)

Mr Speaker: As the two motions relate to Supply resolutions, I propose to conduct one debate. I shall ask the Minister to move the first motion. The debate will then take place on both motions. At the end of the debate, the House will vote on the first motion. The Minister will then move the second motion formally, and the House will vote on it. The Business Committee has not imposed a time limit on the debate, and I do not intend to propose any limit on the length of Members' contributions, hence the motion to suspend Standing Orders.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren):
I beg to move

That this Assembly approves that a further sum not exceeding £198,035,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2002 and that further resources, not exceeding £574,419,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2002 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 2(b) and 3(b) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2001-02 that was laid before the Assembly on 11 February 2002.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £3,936,009,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2003 and that resources, not exceeding £4,486,387,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2003 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2002-03 document that was laid before the Assembly on 11 February 2002. — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel.*]

Dr Farren: I introduce two important resolutions of the budgetary cycle. The first resolution seeks the approval of the Assembly to the issue of a further sum of £198 million from the Consolidated Fund and the

use of additional resources amounting to £574 million for the 2001-02 financial year, as detailed in the spring Supplementary Estimates booklet.

The second resolution seeks the Assembly's approval on the issue of a cash sum of £3,936 million on account for the 2002-03 financial year. It also seeks the Assembly's authority for the use of resources amounting to £4,486 million on account in the 2002-03 financial year.

Before moving to the detail of those resolutions, I wish to acknowledge the confirmation by the Committee for Finance and Personnel that there has been adequate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals reflected in those resolutions. I am aware of the Committee's keen and proper interest in finance issues, and I look forward to working with the Committee in the coming months. I hope to build on the constructive and positive relationship established by my predecessor, Mark Durkan, and to see what more we can do to improve the consultative process and enhance the scrutiny role of the Assembly and its Committees.

As an Assembly, one of our fundamental responsibilities is to authorise expenditure and to hold Departments to account for how it is used. Resolutions such as those that I am introducing today are the basis on which the legislature, in the form of the Assembly, authorises the spending of the Departments, the Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and other bodies for the exercise of their various functions. That is one of the main means we have of ensuring that we deliver on our agreed plans and, in due course, deliver the Executive's Programme for Government.

The scope of the debate covers expenditure in 2001-02 and 2002-03. The first of the two resolutions is the means by which Supplementary Estimates can be examined by the Assembly. As was the case with the Main Estimates for 2001-02, and as is now the normal practice, those Supplementary Estimates are also presented on a resource basis. The Supplementary Estimates are the main means of implementing and confirming the decisions by the Executive on the allocation of resources brought forward from 2000-01 under the end-year flexibility arrangements, and on the reallocation of resources through the in-year monitoring rounds in June, September and December. It also includes decisions that have been made in relation to the second tranche of the Executive programme funds, which my predecessor, Mark Durkan, announced on 3 December. Therefore, the Supplementary Estimates represent the implementation of financial decisions that we have taken since the Assembly agreed the opening position when it approved the Main Estimates last June.

I wish to emphasise a fundamentally important aspect of the first resolution: we are not dealing with new proposals; we are merely giving effect to decisions

that have already been made and brought to the attention of the Assembly.

The second resolution is the usual means by which, at this point in the financial cycle, Departments' ongoing financial commitments are authorised during the period between the beginning of the 2002-03 financial year and the presentation to the Assembly of the Main Estimates for that year, which will take place in June. In general, the cash and resource amounts required on account have been calculated as 45% of the 2001-02 total voted provision.

As its name suggests, the Vote on Account is not intended to seek the Assembly's final approval of the allocations for 2002-03, since less than half of the total proposed Budget is being sought in this Budget Bill. It seeks sufficient resources and cash to allow services to proceed until the detailed work on the Main Estimates has been completed in the late spring. At that stage there will be a full opportunity to deal with the details of the spending plans for 2002-03. Last year there was prior discussion between my Department and the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the Main Estimates, and I propose to continue that practice. Thus, today I propose to focus on the issues relating to 2001-02, as this is the last major opportunity for discussion on that period before the end of the financial year.

1.15 pm

This is only the second time that Supplementary Estimates have been presented to the Assembly, and it might be helpful if I remind Members of some important aspects of the Estimates that differ from the Budget and the monitoring rounds. First, the Estimates include all aspects of departmental expenditure that are subject to the authorisation of resources and associated cash appropriation. This means that they include annually managed expenditure as well as that which falls within the departmental expenditure limit. Because we receive automatic adjustment of estimated requirements for annually managed expenditure from the Treasury — and have to return any resources that we do not need to the Treasury — these items are not included in the scope of the public expenditure monitoring rounds, which the Executive conduct and which are regularly announced to the Assembly. The main items in this category are social security benefits — some of which are subject to annual appropriation or authorisation — and others that are charged under legislation to the National Insurance fund, and, hence, do not feature in the voting process. Annually managed expenditure also contains the major non-cash elements of departmental budgets arising from the transition to resource-based budgeting — principally depreciation and the cost of capital charges. Lastly, expenditure under the common agricultural policy also falls into this category because it is fully funded by the European agricultural guarantee and guidance fund.

As well as these annually managed expenditure items, there are some aspects of expenditure that were nominally attached to the departmental expenditure limit, but which are ring-fenced by the Treasury. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I fear that Members will have some difficulty following the complexity of this statement if they do not listen. They will also ensure that other Members do not hear the complexity of the statement.

Dr Farren: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your intervention.

As we have no discretion in the use of these resources, they have not been included in our monitoring rounds. These include expenditure under the EU Peace programmes, and a special addition provided some years ago to cover the costs of the Moyle electricity interconnector. The Supplementary Estimates contain several reduced requirements under the EU Peace programmes that are needed to align with actual expenditure under the programmes. The funding will be made available again in future years and will not be lost to Northern Ireland.

I have already mentioned that some expenditure on social security is handled outside the voting system. This is because there are standing authorisations, in the form of specific legislation, which allow money to be drawn from the Consolidated Fund, or another fund, to provide the particular service. A further example arises when a Department makes a loan under a statutory power. Often under the cash regime the issue of the loan will count towards the departmental expenditure limit, but in some cases this would not need to come through the Estimates and voting system because there is a standing authorisation for the making of loans outside the vote.

Some of the important sources of room to manoeuvre are outside the appropriation system; in particular, receipts from house sales are outside the Department for Social Development votes. The total that determines what we can do is the departmental expenditure limit set by the Treasury. The house sales release some of that spending power, which makes it possible to afford an increase in the cash spending and hence helps us to afford the Supplementary Estimates.

We must also bear in mind the convention that Estimates are not reduced as the year progresses, even if it is clear that the Department concerned will not require the full extent of the Main Estimates cover. By their nature, the figures are estimates, and the sense of the resolution is that the Executive and the Departments are seeking authorisation for spending up to the figure quoted in the Estimates. I appreciate that it is difficult to fully take in all the parameters that surround the spending procedures, but, nonetheless, they are important for the record, and Members should have received the published statement.

The final complication that I need to mention is that there can be agreed transfers of resources between Departments, among Departments of the Executive and the Northern Ireland Office or between Departments here and Whitehall Departments. By convention, if responsibility for a function transfers, the departmental expenditure limit spending provision transfers with it.

All these factors are important. They affect how the figures that are discussed and set out in the Budget planning documents and in the subsequent monitoring rounds are in the end reflected in the final amounts, which must be authorised for issue from the Consolidated Fund to cover the approved expenditure. This is undeniably complex but essential in order to meet the twin requirements that we keep expenditure within the overall Northern Ireland departmental expenditure limit and seek authorisation for no greater amount of expenditure than is set out in the Estimates.

The approval of the Main Estimates for 2001-02 by the Assembly last June provided the detailed basis for the allocation and use of resources for the specific purposes described in the Estimates. Since then there have been in-year monitoring rounds in June, September and December, which resulted in decisions to make changes in these allocations, as well as a further announcement of funding from the Executive programme funds.

The in-year monitoring exercises provide an important means — indeed, usually the only means — by which we can respond to new pressures by taking advantage of any easements that emerge. I know that there has been some disquiet among Members about the substantial sums that have become available during monitoring rounds, and I have indicated that the Executive have agreed that we should examine the financial monitoring systems to see if there is room to improve our forecasting.

Let me address at this point a fundamental issue regarding the monitoring process, particularly as there has been an attempt to misrepresent how such moneys could, and should, be used. When Departments underspend on their budgets, those moneys are surrendered to the centre, where they can be reallocated according to the Executive's priorities. They are not available for reallocation by Ministers within Departments. That would be wrong, as by their nature monitoring moneys are short term, and it would be politically dishonest to suggest that such funds could be used to address long-term policy issues. Some Members have suggested that underspent money in the Department for Employment and Learning, for example, could have been redirected towards student support.

Allegations of wastage have been made against that Department. Not only are such allegations factually incorrect in the amounts of money referred to with regard to underspends, but in making these misrepresentations

a disservice is being rendered to the genuine cause of students' welfare, to which the House has already directed considerable attention and resources.

In addressing these issues, particularly monitoring rounds, we must bear in mind the length of the financial planning cycle. We must also encourage Departments to continue to identify easements as early in the financial year as possible so that they can ensure that they are deployed to the best possible effect. A good example of this is the final monitoring round of the financial year, which is held in February. Practical opportunities to spend at that time are limited. Furthermore, decisions are made on the monitoring round after the Supplementary Estimates have been agreed. Therefore, there is limited scope to deploy funds. It is problematic if Departments make large surrenders at that stage, as the opportunities to allow other Departments to take advantage of the funding are limited.

The outcomes of the monitoring rounds and the decisions on the Executive programme funds have been accompanied by detailed statements to the Assembly at each stage. Although it is not possible to have prior consultations with the Committee for Finance and Personnel before announcing the Executive's decisions on those monitoring rounds, Mark Durkan and I have been available to explain the position, and there has been scope since each monitoring round for any scrutiny that may have been required. In this context, I want to repeat Mark Durkan's advice that Committees do not need a starting gun from the Department of Finance and Personnel to ask their Departments about emerging spending pressures, or to scrutinise performance at any time throughout the year. As I said, they have the liberty and the capacity to do so.

The total amount of the Supplementary Estimates is £574 million in resource terms and an associated cash requirement of £198 million for the year ending 31 March 2002. The detailed allocations contained in the booklets have been determined by Departments after careful consideration and approval by the Department of Finance and Personnel. Ministers will be better placed than I to explain and justify some of the detail, but, in so far as I can do so today, I shall try to deal with any of the matters raised by Members. If I cannot, I shall refer the matter to the relevant Minister for more detailed consideration.

To gain a picture of how the figures of £574 million and £198 million in resources and cash respectively are made up, one must go back to the decisions taken after the monitoring rounds. First, there is on this occasion a significant difference between the resource and cash requirements, as the figures show. That is largely due to an increase of £300 million of resources — but not cash — sought by the Department for Regional Development to reflect a reassessment of the value of the road network.

For the reasons that I have given, the amounts reallocated do not correspond exactly to the net surplus after monitoring, since several technical adjustments are also made at those stages.

1.30 pm

For the reasons that I gave, the amounts reallocated do not correspond exactly to the net surplus after monitoring, because technical adjustments are made at those stages. However, during the monitoring rounds the Departments declared some £146.2 million as easements, which were weighed against bids for additional resources totalling £415.5 million. Inevitably, there is some double counting in the figures for bids, because unsuccessful bids in one round are likely to be repeated later. A further £30 million for Departments was also announced through the Executive programme funds. Those figures help to illustrate the process. I will say more about how individual allocations to individual Departments will be affected later.

As with the approval of the Main Estimates last June and the agreement of the Budget for 2002-03 in December, decisions about the allocation of resources have been influenced by equality requirements, as set out in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and policy precepts such as New TSN and the Programme for Government.

I know from the interest that Members and Committees demonstrated, especially the Committee for Finance and Personnel, that the responsibility that we fulfil today is not assumed lightly. As an Executive and an Assembly, we have a duty to ensure the highest standards of propriety in respect of public finances. That is an aspect of the authorisation, management and control of expenditure by the Assembly, the Departments and the bodies that they fund. The efficient use of resources is no less important as we strive to deliver the highest-quality public services from the funds available.

Those are matters in which the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have a particular interest. They can examine how public sector bodies perform in meeting their objectives and ensure that they do so with propriety and efficiency. As the Minister of Finance and Personnel, I acknowledge the important function that they perform and the interest, proposals and work of the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

I do not propose to discuss line by line the changes to the allocations for individual Departments, because the introduction to each departmental Estimate within the Supplementary Estimates booklet sets out in detail — some might say in too much detail — the main changes that are sought. I will, however, highlight some of the key changes.

The total net additional resource requirement of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is £54.5 million. In request for resources A, which provides for ongoing services and support measures, an additional £15.8 million net resource requirement is sought. Additions of £32 million are necessary. Those cover costs relating to animal disease, including foot-and-mouth disease, brucellosis, tuberculosis and BSE, as well as the funding required for the national element of the agrimonetary package. Those additions are offset by reductions totalling £16.2 million, including those resulting from a delay in the Northern Ireland scrapie plan as a result of foot-and-mouth disease, from the beef quality initiative, and the processing and marketing grants, which were affected by a delay in obtaining state aids approval. There are also reduced requirements for the funding of rural development grants, the European Union Peace programme, capital charges and depreciation costs.

In request for resources B, which provides for the work of the Rivers Agency, the Forest Service and sea fisheries, an additional £38.7 million net resource requirement is sought. Additions of £40.8 million are necessary, of which £38.7 million is for capital charges and depreciation costs attributable to revaluation of the assets of the Rivers Agency. Other additions arise in respect of foot-and-mouth-disease costs and the Forest Service.

These additions are offset by reductions totalling £2.1 million, which are mainly in respect of the European Union Peace programme. When the additional resource requirement is adjusted to a cash basis, and capital expenditure is taken into account, the Department is seeking additional cash of £17.6 million to fund expenditure on the Estimate.

The total net additional resource requirement for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is £13.2 million. The major additions are £10 million for the public library service to meet the one-off costs of the arrears arising from the job evaluation review, as well as ongoing costs, and an additional £1.6 million for the Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI) to address deficits and health-and-safety-related maintenance work.

The additions are offset by a reduction of £1 million through rescheduling of expenditure in the European Union Peace programme, and a number of smaller technical adjustments totalling £0.6 million. When the additional resource requirement is adjusted to a cash basis, and capital expenditure is taken into account, the Department is seeking additional cash of £12.3 million to fund expenditure on the Estimate.

An increase of £13.6 million is sought by the Department of Education in request for resources A, which covers schools. That includes an increase of £16.4 million in capital provision, which is mainly for schools and includes provision of £2 million for

disabled access. A sum of £10.2 million is being provided for teachers' pay, £3 million for infrastructure provision for the Classroom 2000 project and £1.2 million for school fuel costs.

Those increases are offset principally by reduced requirements of £13 million on threshold payments to teachers, as, in accrual terms, certain threshold payments relate to the 2000-01 financial year, not the 2001-02 financial year. Other reduced requirements relate to the European Union Peace programme and the deferment of the introduction of the revised Northern Ireland curriculum from September 2003 to September 2004.

In request for resources B, which covers the Youth Service and community relations for young people, an increase of some £3.5 million is sought. This includes £1 million in mainstream Youth Service provision, including £0.1 million for support measures in north Belfast, as well as other additions totalling £3 million for capital programmes, European Union programmes and the Executive programme funds for the Youth Service. When the resource requirement is adjusted to a cash basis, and departmental capital expenditure is taken into account, the Department is seeking a cash increase of some £20.2 million to fund expenditure in the Estimate.

The total net additional resource requirement for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is £10.8 million. In request for resources A, which provides for the Department's economic and regeneration measures, an additional net £12.2 million is sought. Additions include £16.5 million being carried forward from 2000-01 under end-year flexibility arrangements for the Moyle interconnector, £7 million for payments under the European Union Peace I programme, and £2 million to enable LEDU to meet an increase in demand for grants by the small business sector. Those additions have been offset by a reduced requirement of £13.6 million from the Industrial Development Board, arising from the economic downturn.

In request for resources B, which provides for equality, policy and regulatory measures, there is a net decrease of £1.4 million made up of a technical reallocation of £2.8 million to request for resources A for depreciation and capital charges and a further reallocation from request for resources A to request for resources B to meet administration, legal and consultancy costs. When the additional resource requirement is adjusted to a cash basis, and capital expenditure is taken into account, the Department is seeking additional cash of £12.8 million to fund expenditure on this Estimate.

The total net additional resource requirement for the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas is £0.3 million. This includes additional provision to cover salary and associated costs on gas-related work and

results in a cash requirement of £0.2 million to fund expenditure on this Estimate.

The Department for Regional Development is seeking an increase of just over £306 million in the total net resource requirement. There is a reduction of under £5 million in the total provision to meet direct expenditure on the purchase of assets and investment in capital projects. The Department's request for resources A covers roads, transport and strategic planning functions with related central administration. The increase of approximately £315 million is attributable mainly to an increase in non-cash costs such as depreciation and capital charges after a revaluation of the road network. Additional resources of just under £11 million are being made available for structural maintenance and essential bridge maintenance as well as to meet the increased costs of certain oil-based products. These additional costs are partly offset by an increase of £1 million in income, mainly from car-parking charges.

Provision for capital expenditure by the Roads Service is reduced by £1.7 million due to delays in the progress of some road schemes. An increase of £1.4 million is for the purchase of the new Strangford ferry and reflects a redistribution of resources in the Roads Service. On the transport side there are increases of £2.8 million for the public service obligation compensation payable to Northern Ireland Railways and £3 million for grants to the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company for rail and bus fare concessions. Request for resources A also includes an additional £5 million to fund capital expenditure by the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company.

In the Department's request for resources B, which relates to the provision of water and sewerage services, there is an overall reduction in the total net resource requirement. That largely reflects a reassessment of depreciation and the cost of capital charges and other non-cash costs. An increase of £2.5 million is sought to cover increased salary and wage costs as well as an increase of £3.3 million to meet additional costs incurred for sludge disposal and odour reduction measures. Those increases are partly offset by additional income of £1 million, mainly from metered water charges.

On the capital side, the increase in provision of £1.4 million includes an additional £0.8 million for the purchase of information technology equipment, together with a redistribution of resources. When accruals to cash adjustments are made, the Department for Regional Development's net cash requirement for the year is increased by £19 million to £528 million.

The Department for Employment and Learning is seeking an increase of £3.2 million in request for resources A covering higher and further education and student support. The increase is to provide disabled people with access to higher and further education institutions,

to cover a higher than expected pay award for further education lecturers, additional grant for Lisburn College and additional private finance initiative (PFI) costs, and to take account of carry forward of unspent capital budget under the end-year flexibility scheme.

1.45 pm

The total net additional resource requirement for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is £94.9 million. In request for resources A, which mainly provides for ongoing departmental administration costs, an additional £1 million net resource requirement is being sought. That includes funding for the Occupational Health Service, £0.2 million for additional staff, and cover for reduced income. It is offset by a reduction in the Health Estates Agency.

An additional £92.9 million net resource requirement is being sought in request for resources B, which provides for the health and personal social services programme. This includes £49.6 million, which is a non-cash adjustment with neutral impact on the overall spending power. Additional funds have been made available to the Health Service at each monitoring round during the current financial year and include £28 million towards hospital and community care pressures.

Ten million pounds was made available for health and social services trust deficits. Decisions made by the Executive, coupled with careful financial management and monitoring, mean that positive steps have been taken to ensure that the financial management of the Health Service has been put onto a firmer footing and that expenditure will be managed within the resources available. Funding has also gone towards increasing access to new treatment for rheumatoid arthritis and to cardiac surgery, and towards measures to facilitate earlier discharge from hospital and to prevent avoidable admission.

Other significant increases within this request for resources include £5 million for demand-led family health services, £2 million towards clinical negligence settlements, £3 million for drug strategy projects and action to combat drugs, and £1.4 million for grants available under the EU Peace programme. The total increase in this area has been offset by £9 million additional receipts from Health Service contributions.

Request for resources C contains an additional £1 million for the Fire Authority towards staff pension costs. When the resource requirement is adjusted to a cash basis, and capital expenditure is taken into account, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is seeking an additional £46 million to fund expenditure on this Estimate.

The Department for Social Development is seeking increases in its three requests for resources. An increase of £14 million is being sought in request for

resources A, which covers the Department's social security and child support programmes. That is made up of additional non-contributory and income-related benefit expenditure of £9 million due to increased requirements for a range of benefits and payments. A further £1 million is required for administration, and £4 million for certain non-cash items.

In request for resources B, which covers the Department's housing programme, additional resources of £5 million are being sought, mainly in the revenue grant to the Housing Executive.

Additional resources of £14.5 million are being sought in request for resources C, which covers the Department's urban regeneration and community development programme. Those include additional funding for Making Belfast Work and the Derry Regeneration Initiative's programme expenditure, the EU programmes, the Executive programme funds and administration costs. When the resource requirement is adjusted to a cash basis, and capital expenditure is taken into account, the Department is seeking an additional £34 million cash to fund expenditure on the Estimate.

I now turn to the Department of Finance and Personnel, where an additional £24,000 is being sought in request for resources A to cover additional running costs in the central finance group.

An additional £6.1 million is required in request for resources B, which covers support for public sector business performance. That covers the net effect of the increased costs of running the Government estate and the census, the provision of research and statistical services, and the provision of purchasing services, which are funded by transfers by other Departments. The sum of £49,000 is required in request for resources C, arising from the implementation of the final phase of the Valuation and Lands Agency's grade and structure review.

The Department of Finance and Personnel seeks an additional £19.3 million to meet higher than anticipated costs associated with the operation of the Civil Service superannuation scheme. I emphasise that those costs are borne in annually managed expenditure and, therefore, do not restrict the resources available for allocation by the Executive. The main reasons for the increase are the higher than anticipated transfer-out costs — where members leave the superannuation scheme — and the increasing numbers reaching normal retirement age.

An increase in resources of £3.8 million is sought for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Some £2 million of that increase relates to provision for the North/South Ministerial Council, the Civic Forum, the Planning Appeals Commission and the Water Appeals Commission. The balance is required to meet the cost of departmental administration, foot-and-mouth-disease advertisements, the increased

provision for the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the European Union Peace programme.

When the additional resource requirement is adjusted to a cash basis, and capital expenditure is taken into account, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy Minister is seeking an additional cash sum of £3.6 million to fund expenditure on the Estimate.

The total net additional resource requirement for the Northern Ireland Assembly is £1.4 million. That reflects the transfer of provision from resources to capital of £7.9 million arising from the purchase and refurbishment of additional accommodation — principally, Ormiston House — and an increase in depreciation and capital charges of £9.3 million after the revaluation of existing assets and the purchase of additional assets. When the additional resources requirement is adjusted to a cash basis, the Northern Ireland Assembly is seeking additional cash of £90,000 to fund expenditure on the Estimate.

In respect of the Northern Ireland Audit Office, and the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, there are small increases of £49,000 and £13,000 respectively.

That deals with the resolution for the spring Supplementary Estimates. I will endeavour to answer Members' questions.

I will turn now to the second Supply resolution for the issue of an amount — that is, a cash sum — of £3,936 million to be granted on account towards defraying the costs incurred by Departments and the use of resources of some £4,486 million for the same purposes in the year 2002-03. The cash sum and the resource totals for which approval is sought represent a Vote on Account, pending the bringing forward of the Main Estimates to the Assembly in June. A Vote on Account at this point in the financial year, prior to the year in which the cash or resources will be used, is a normal feature of Government financial management. It arises because, after the Assembly's approval of the Budget in December, detailed work has to be undertaken by Departments, and by the Department of Finance and Personnel, to disaggregate and allocate resource requirements for individual purposes, often through narrowly defined line entries.

The Vote on Account reflects both the allocation of cash to Departments and the allocation, up to a limit, for the use of resources. As already explained, the Vote on Account takes account of the levels of expenditure agreed by the Assembly in the Budget and will be consistent with the figure work brought forward in the Main Estimates later this year. There will, of course, be an opportunity for a full debate on the details at that stage.

In the interim, the Vote on Account will fund Departments to implement the ongoing programmes and

services for which they are responsible and which form part of the Budget decisions that were taken last December.

As I have said, this is the second occasion on which a Minister of Finance and Personnel has presented Supplementary Estimates to the Assembly. The devolved Assembly has again been able to make decisions for a complete financial year. We have also announced the first allocations from the Executive programme funds in this financial year. However, the Executive are conscious of the need to ensure that resources are targeted effectively. As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I intend to ensure that future financial recommendations continue to be subject to careful and detailed scrutiny — and to challenge, if necessary.

The Assembly and the Committees have a vital role to play in these processes. I am committed to doing all that is possible to ensure that Members can fulfil their responsibilities effectively. In that context, I have noted that the Committee for Finance and Personnel has expressed several concerns about the process, the documentation and the time available for consideration of matters.

I fully understand those concerns, and I acknowledge the need for further developments. We face real difficulties as a result of the timescale to which we must work. I will examine the scope for improvement, and I will work with the Committee to achieve that end in the months ahead. To assist us to ensure that we are targeting funding in the most appropriate way possible, we are carrying out a review of the Executive programme funds, which will inform our shaping of the future management and direction of those funds. We will continue to attach the highest priority to ensuring that we manage and control the resources that are available to us.

Through the Programme for Government and the Budget, we have the opportunity to set out our priorities and plans. Our challenge is to provide the highest-quality services to our citizens.

The detail of my statement is complex by its nature — perhaps it is made more complex by looking backwards while planning for the future, but it is appropriate that we do so. The Executive and the Assembly have achieved much in the past two years. We are getting to grips with the challenge of setting our own spending priorities and directing resources towards them. Our challenge is to continue to spend money in an efficient and effective way, so that the people whom we serve can see that we are making a difference. We have made a good start, and the advantages of devolution are on display in the Chamber this afternoon.

Achieving our aims for the future will not be easy or straightforward, and this will not be a comfortable year financially. We face a crucial spending review,

which will conclude in the summer. Many Members appreciate that challenging the Barnett formula is not a no-risk option. Ministers and I will weigh these matters carefully before proceeding, and I will continue to value the advice of the departmental Committee and the Assembly before doing so.

2.00 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and detailed explanation of the spring Supplementary Estimates. At its meeting on 5 February, the Committee for Finance and Personnel considered the near final proof document of the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2001-02 and the Vote on Account for 2002-03. Department of Finance and Personnel officials appeared before the Committee to answer questions and to help it to navigate its way through those difficult issues. The documentation involved is dense.

The Committee acknowledges that the format of the Estimates is naturally detailed and that the Minister inherited the current versions. The Committee also accepts that the introduction of resource accounting and budgeting has added a layer of detail to what was already a complicated financial document. The Committee is concerned about the short period provided for Committees to scrutinise the Estimates. It is also essential that the format of the Estimates be user-friendly so that the Assembly and its Committees can do their job effectively. Appropriate guidance must be made available to enable Members to make sense of the Estimates, which they are expected to approve, and to inform the public. Department of Finance and Personnel officials share that concern and have undertaken to address it. The Committee is concerned that that matter be progressed urgently and that the improvements are in place before the Main Estimates in June.

The timing of the debate and the arrival only this morning of the final version of the Estimates and the Vote on Account leave much to be desired. The Committee must not be taken for granted. It will not continue simply to be a rubber stamp for accelerated passage of the Budget Bill unless the Executive provide sufficient opportunity for consultation and scrutiny. That is a crucial issue. Last week the Committee considered the matter in detail before it approved the Bill's accelerated passage.

The Assembly must find ways to help Committees. Departments must co-operate with them to ensure that that happens. The Committee welcomed the Minister's recent decision to review the effectiveness of the in-year monitoring procedure against the considerable quantum of reallocations. Departments already have problems in quantifying their budget needs. There is a danger that resources are being deployed and not

spent. Those resources could be spent by other Departments and might have been more effectively allocated elsewhere in the first instance. The Assembly must examine budgeting and how it is followed up so that it targets the Departments that are most in need.

The Committee urges the Minister to complete his review in time for the first monitoring round of the new financial year. It will look carefully at any proposals that emerge. The Committee accepts that the Estimates documentation may remain dense and complicated. There may be some advantage in the Department of Finance and Personnel providing for Committees and Members a training and awareness seminar on the subject. I wrote to the Minister to highlight those issues on 7 February. I hope that he will be able to respond positively to the Committee's concerns. Although the Committee for Finance and Personnel accepted the accounting nature of the Supply Resolutions and has formally written to the Speaker to approve the accelerated passage of the Budget Bill under Standing Order 42, the Minister and the Executive must reflect on the concerns that were raised, and about which I spoke earlier. The process must be remedied in time so that the situation can be rectified before the Main Estimates in June.

Speaking as a Member from west of the Bann, not as a Committee Chairperson, I reiterate some issues. The Assembly must examine the lack of health facilities, poor infrastructure, poor school buildings and all the other issues that were targeted as priorities in the Programme for Government. Proper budgeting by Departments is necessary. It is noticeable that £198 million is reallocated in various ways by Committees under the monitoring rounds. That money is recycled several times. If, at the outset, that money had been allocated in Budget form to the Department that needed it most, the continuous monitoring rounds might involve less money. This is not new money — as the Minister said several times — it is money that has been regurgitated. We must examine this issue.

The Assembly has three priorities, health, education and infrastructure, and these are needed most west of the Bann. The money must be correctly allocated, and I am glad that the Minister agrees that there must be a review of that procedure. The Assembly must address the imbalance that exists between the areas east and west of the Bann. The west of the Bann has been neglected for years by Unionists in the old Stormont Parliament and by the British Government during direct rule. This situation must be changed if the Assembly is to signal new ways of moving forward. We must redress the balance.

We must ensure that New TSN is not just about the three letters "T", "S" and "N". We must ensure that we are targeting social need where it arises. Unfortunately, this approach was not followed during the allocations of European funding. Although that is not the Minister's

direct responsibility in his present role, it is part of the Department of Finance and Personnel's remit. How is a situation dealt with whereby an area west of the Bann is depopulated over years and then population is used as an indicator for allocating European funds? The indicator has been a failure. Depopulation has caused the west to suffer in relation to jobs, housing, infrastructure and economic development. If budgets are to target social need, the Assembly must put itself in a position to address this problem. The present system is not doing that. We are simply doing what has been done in the past and following the same patterns.

Timescales are too short. Committees do not have enough time to scrutinise Budgets and develop their ideas. Departments do not have time to think through new policies. I had hoped that this could have happened with respect to the Executive programme funds, but it has not. Executive programme funds are being allocated in the same way as normal budgeting rounds.

I will return to the monitoring rounds. A total of £198 million is being recycled year after year. If health were to be prioritised, we could allocate that money to the Department at the beginning of the budgeting round to address the imbalance. Over time we could prioritise housing, education and infrastructure instead of simply recycling money. If the Assembly did that, it would start to redress the balance of the past. If it cannot do that, the Assembly will fail.

In the new rounds each Department and Committee must take this situation into account when they are in the bidding process, and not simply wait until this stage, which is merely a rubber-stamping exercise. We must look at departmental bids. Are they targeting social need? Is the money going where it should, or are Departments budgeting for things that they may want to implement but cannot deliver?

I ask Committee members to ensure that they are involved in the process and that they receive the information. I hear, through the Chairpersons Liaison Committee, that Members cannot get information from relevant Departments. Members are entitled to that information. I urge them to get the relevant information and become involved in the bidding process, so that the Assembly is not simply rubber-stamping the Budget at the end of the process. In that way, we can address the imbalance and make good progress for the future. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McGrady: I want to place on record my sincere thanks to the Minister of Finance and Personnel for the detailed presentation of the spring Supplementary Estimates, and also for touching on the Budget for 2002-03.

One of the greatest problems in any Budget debate in Northern Ireland is that we are, as someone recently put it, seeking pieces of a pre-baked cake, in that we

have very little or almost no ability to expand our revenue and hence to expand our expenditure. Quite correctly, there are, and will be, considerable tensions between Departments in seeking the maximum share of the cake.

I assume — and I hope that the Minister will confirm this — that it is the Executive's collective responsibility to determine the priorities to which the various sectors of the cake are allocated. In other words, is there corporate responsibility within the Executive for the budgets now being put before us? Added revenue resulting from each proposition made by any Department must, because of the finite cake, be taken from some other Department or cause. It is incumbent on any Minister or any Member who asks for additional resources to have the courage to indicate where those resources should come from. Otherwise it is a glib question, and we should not raise people's hopes on various financial matters that are not in the control of the Assembly or the Executive.

In that frame of mind, I assume that the Minister can confirm that the Minister for each Department agrees with the Budget, with the Supplementary Estimates for 2001-02 and the proposals for 2002-03.

Time and time again I am surprised when certain individual Ministers claim that in some way they have been deprived of resources to do x, y or z. I have always assumed — and if I am wrong I hope that the Minister will correct me — that each Minister agrees to his or her own budget and to the totality of the Budget. In that process there must be give and take, but that is the position, and we must therefore desist from passing the buck to other Departments or Ministers. Otherwise, the Minister should explain that our 10 Departments are independent and not related at all, but I do not believe that for a minute.

In general terms, however, we must question where we can expand the resources available to us. We should pursue possible alternative sources of revenue, either within or without our jurisdiction. I am not ashamed to admit that I would seek additional resources from other countries on the grounds that they understand our problems, that they have been sympathetic and that they have contributed in the past. Only now do we evaluate the huge shortfall in almost every Department as a result of the years of direct rule. Time and again the enormity of the lack of infrastructure and basic capital expenditure during that time comes to the fore. I note that the Minister in his introduction indicated at least an amber light in respect of the Barnett formula, although he advised us to weigh up the risk options when dealing with that problem. However, off the cuff it looks as if that is the only option we have at the moment — risks and all — whether we like it or not, in the hope that fair play and justice will win in the end.

On top of that, multimillion pounds of additional funding are announced from time to time for roads or

health by the Exchequer in London. Does an appropriate part of that filter down to the Government and Departments in Northern Ireland? I am not very sure that it does.

2.15 pm

Maximising parallel funding is another important area that we should engage in strenuously, not only at Executive administrative level but at local government level. Time and time again I hear rumours — although I seldom hear the facts — that European funding, which requires parallel funding from the Exchequer, cannot come into play either because of the absence of parallel funding or, sometimes, because of the lack of efficient administration and appropriate application. The Assembly has a duty to assist local authorities, of whatever nature, when they seek external funding. We must offer them expertise and advice, and open their lines of communication.

The Minister said that the amount indicated for 2002-03 is not the final allocation, and I am sure that we shall return to the various sectors during debates in the early summer and the autumn.

It would be inappropriate for a Member to speak in such a debate and to be completely global in his or her remarks. Therefore, it may be that I have an excuse to be slightly parochial for a moment, but I shall try to apply a general thesis. Will the Minister, or the appropriate Minister, confirm that, if a hospital construction is programmed to take place immediately after the Hayes review, it should be specific in the Estimates for 2002-03 at this stage? If not, I presume that any comment to the contrary would be false, especially in view of the fact that the money for Downe Hospital has, allegedly, been available for four years. However, as I am unaware of its being reallocated to another project, I presume that it was never there. That is another story.

There is also the question of the strong promises that were made for the Mourne health facility that was demolished six years ago and was to have been replaced. Again, that is not the Minister of Finance and Personnel's responsibility, but if after six years it is not in a funding programme, I wonder whether the project is capable of delivery in the allocated time frame.

Is there any scope to introduce free residential care for the elderly? The issue is twofold. First, there is the obvious benefit that residential care creates. Secondly, Members know that many beds that could serve other purposes are tied up locally because hospitals are unable to discharge the elderly into their communities.

Mr Molloy mentioned educational allocation. Is the concept of equality proofing and rural proofing fully applied to all the allocations across the sectors? Mr Molloy referred to some sectors; I refer to all sectors because it must be applied to all Departments.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Is the hon Gentleman clear about what rural proofing really means? We have been seeking a definition from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for many months, and we have not been given an answer.

Mr McGrady: I do not know whether to thank the Member for his intervention, because I cannot answer his question.

We have a concept of rural proofing. I know what I mean when I use the term "rural proofing". I am not aware of any departmental definition of the term, but it has been talked about a great deal in the Executive's Programme for Government and in relation to the concept of equality. The Noble indices have been introduced to show shortfalls in social resources, and my guess is that rural communities, in particular, are under-represented as regards allocations. It is easier to focus on the visible deprivation in urban areas, but deprivation is often not as apparent in rural communities. That is why I am anxious that this aspect of rural proofing be applied urgently to the allocations in all Departments.

Equality and rural proofing are also relevant to the Department for Regional Development. The Assembly has recently debated the Department's transport policy and other policies and, speaking as a representative of south-east Ulster, I think that it is becoming apparent that there is a shortfall in allocations to these programmes and intentions in that area. I cannot go into detail about that.

Fishing is often not mentioned, although it is the responsibility of the same Department as agriculture. Fishing is a major industry in my constituency. Will there be provision in the 2002-03 Estimates for a new policy for agricultural development? There is a vision group paper on the subject, which is at consultation stage and which will be addressed in detail in the next couple of months. However, in the aftermath of BSE, foot-and-mouth disease and the crisis with international exchange rates and the green pound, it is essential that we have a definitive policy, backed by finance, to allow those who wish to retire from farming to do so with dignity and a degree of financial and social security.

We must also have the ability to introduce new blood to the agriculture industry by providing, for example, a scheme similar to the Dutch one. Such a scheme would allow new entrants who are well trained, well versed in farming, modern technologies and trade techniques to be brought into the farming industry. Unless we have such a vision for agriculture, backed by finance, we will simply be treading water.

It is very tempting to speak about all Departments, Mr Speaker, but you will frown upon me if I speak for much longer. I hope that we have an opportunity to address some fundamental policy issues so that we can re-resource and reallocate funding for 2002-03. Aside

from the urgent need to spend current Budget allocations within the current financial year, of which there are about five or six weeks remaining, there is not much that we can do about initiating and paying for new schemes.

Given the often-repeated announcements from the Blair/Brown axis that millions of pounds of additional resources are being put into roads, education and health, can we be assured that we will get a real and meaningful share of that money, backed up by compensation for the shortfall that we suffered under years of direct rule? That is my central concern.

Can we also look for alternative resources with which to build a bigger cake, so that Departments can be given a bigger slice to deal with their various requirements? The principles of the Barnett formula are difficult to grasp, but there is no point in dealing with that issue today. However, I hope that at the end of that we will have an outcome that will substantially enhance the resources available to Northern Ireland.

Will the Minister confirm that the spring Supplementary Estimates, and the Estimates for 2002-03, are the consequences of an agreed Budget, reflecting the input of every Minister who signs up to and agrees with it? Furthermore, does the Minister agree that, in principle, it is totally wrong for a Minister to say that they were not given x or y by another Minister? Responsibility for the Budget is either collegiate or it is not. If it is not, I would like to know that so that I can handle the matter differently. If responsibility is collegiate, Ministers making statements outside the House should show more honesty and integrity.

Mr Speaker: The House will know that we must interrupt the debate at 2.30 pm for Question Time. I am therefore hesitant to call the next Member on my list — the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, Dr Paisley — because I suspect that he would barely be getting into his stride when I would have to interrupt him. Of course, he could resume his remarks after 4.00 pm, but I think that it would be fairer to him, and to the House, if we were to make clear that he will be called at 4.00 pm. In the meantime, the House will take its leisure for a few minutes.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise Members that question 9, in the name of Mr John Kelly, has been transferred to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and will receive a written answer. I do not see Ms Lewsley in her place, so I call Mr Ken Robinson.

Mr K Robinson: Question 1.

Mr Speaker: That takes cross-community co-operation a bit further than is legitimate in the Chamber.

Salary Differentials

2. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to ensure that salary differentials continue to exist for vice-principals and principals of schools following the introduction of threshold payments for teachers. (AQO 790/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The agreement negotiated last year between management and teachers on the teachers' salaries and conditions of service committee recognises that there should be appropriate salary differentials. Under that agreement, a vice-principal's salary range starts at a point above the salary of the highest-paid teacher in the school. In turn, the first point on the principal's salary range must be higher than the top point of the vice-principal's salary range.

The problem lies in reaching agreement on appropriate differentials, given the differences between schools in management structures, job weights and existing pay differentials. The employing authorities and my Department have been working hard on guidance for boards of governors on the pay arrangements for principals and vice-principals. Although this has not been a straightforward task, it is expected that the guidance will issue very shortly. Any consequential pay changes for principals and vice-principals will be backdated to 1 September 2000.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister agree that the people who have held our schools and community together over the past 30 years, when others were hell-bent on destruction, now deserve to see a tangible reward for their loyalty and dedication? Also, does the Minister consider it proper when a teacher at the top of her scale is promoted to the post of vice-principal and, as a consequence, is £500 less well off, or when two vice-principals now find themselves on a salary

£1,500 lower than the highest-paid teacher in their school, or, indeed, when a teaching principal who worked in the evenings and over the weekends to ensure that his colleagues received their threshold increase has yet to be told when his differential will be restored?

Mr M McGuinness: When the pay agreement was reached last year, priority was given to putting in place the arrangements for assessing eligible teachers and paying salary increases to those assessed as meeting the standards. Principals, assessors and the employing authorities have done an excellent job in completing almost all the assessments, and some 70% of successful teachers have now been paid. The new arrangement for vice-principals has not yet been implemented because of the priority given to threshold assessments. When it is implemented shortly, all vice-principals will receive more than their teachers, and the awards will be backdated to the same date as that applying to teachers.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister instigate an independent inquiry into teachers' pay and conditions?

Mr M McGuinness: I am still considering that matter. I have received further representations from teachers, and I expect to announce my decision soon.

Care of Young People

3. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Education to detail any discussions he has had with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety regarding the care of young people leaving schools such as Hillcroft Special School, Newtownabbey, at the age of 19. (AQO 783/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I personally have not had discussions with my Colleague, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, on this issue. However, the procedures are as follows. The Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 requires education and library boards to refer pupils in special schools to the relevant health and social services trust at age 14 for an opinion as to whether they come within the scope of the Act and are, therefore, likely to require further care when they leave school. The special education legislation imposes certain duties on boards regarding transition planning. My Department's code of practice on the identification and assessment of special educational needs provides further advice on the process. Boards are required to inform trusts about a young person leaving special school up to a year in advance.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his response on the procedures. The issue is clearly of major concern and another area was highlighted in the press at the weekend.

Before the Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1989, special schools under the control of health and

social services boards appear to have had much greater co-ordination with sheltered workshops and adult centres than they have now. Is it acceptable that, because of difficulties with provision, young people are thrown out of the only available care for them in special schools before alternative care is provided?

Mr M McGuinness: Education and library boards are required to notify health and social services boards and trusts for an opinion on whether young people in special schools who reach the age of 14 are disabled according to the Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 and may, therefore, require further care on leaving school. That happens at least two years, but more commonly five years, before such young people leave school. I cannot see any merit in earlier notification, although we are all responsible for examining those issues.

Health and social services trusts may wish to approach the education and library boards about that specific problem to see if opportunities exist for the use of school facilities out of school hours. For example, special schools' assembly halls could be used for sports or drama activities, specialist rooms could be used for home economics, art, craft and technology, and it might be possible to use hydrotherapy pools, if they were available. That would, of course, be subject to agreement between the trust, the board and the school.

Mr Molloy: What measures are being taken to prepare young people in special schools for life after school at the age of 19?

Mr M McGuinness: The education and library boards are required to prepare a transition plan at the first annual review of the statement of special educational needs after a young person reaches the age of 14, and a transition plan is designed to facilitate a satisfactory transition from childhood to adulthood. It contains the arrangements that a board considers appropriate for a young person who is aged between 14 and 19, including special educational provision and any other necessary provision such as suitable accommodation, leisure activities and employment.

Mr Speaker: I do not see Mr Kennedy in his place, so I call Mr Mick Murphy.

Post-Primary Provision

5. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister of Education what is the core issue in the current debate on post-primary provision; and to make a statement.

(AQO 814/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The core issue in the current debate is academic selection. The weaknesses of the current selective arrangements were evidenced by the research undertaken by Prof Gallagher, Prof Smith,

Save the Children and Prof Gardiner. The submissions to the review body made it clear that the public supports change, and the Assembly endorsed the Committee for Education's conclusion that change is necessary and appropriate. The status quo is not an option.

There is widespread demand for the abolition of the 11-plus test, but it important to realise that that cannot take place unless academic selection is also abolished. I want to encourage debate on the issue, and for that reason I have extended the consultation period.

Mr M Murphy: As the Minister knows, many children were traumatised over the weekend when the 11-plus results were issued, and I for one look forward to the end of this cruel scheme. Will the Minister comment on this year's transfer test results?

Mr M McGuinness: I am sure that all pupils who sat the tests did their best, and I offer my congratulations to all pupils who are in the final year of their primary education. After the test results, there will be rejoicing in many families, but it is important to remember that there will be great disappointment and a sense of failure in many more.

Academic selection and the transfer test mean that two thirds of our children are deemed to be failures, which puts undue pressure on pupils, parents and teachers. For that reason there is widespread demand for the abolition of the test. We now have an opportunity to consider new post-primary arrangements that will value and cherish all children equally. They will open up options rather than close them down, and they will avoid having the majority of our children regarded as failures at the age of 11. To do so, we must address the issue of academic selection.

Mr Dalton: Does the Minister accept that in any post-primary system of education there will always be extremely good schools that will be oversubscribed, and that selection in some form is therefore inevitable? Does the Minister really believe that selection by postcode, and the financial inequity that that would create, is a better system for the twenty-first century?

Mr M McGuinness: I understand that there are concerns about the admissions criteria proposed in the review body's report. My objective is to put in place arrangements that will provide excellence, equality and choice for all children. I do not want to disadvantage children in particular areas. The issue of proximity as the final criterion has raised particular concern, but it is important to remember that the majority of secondary schools and over half the grammar schools already use this criterion as a tie-breaker. However, as part of the consultation process, I would encourage people to consider and suggest alternatives.

Mr Poots: Does the Minister recognise that when bleeding-heart liberals in England and Wales took us

down the road of comprehensive education, it led to poorer results there than in Northern Ireland, where the selection system was retained? Would it not be better to refine the selection system rather than go down the road of social engineering, which will end in poorer results for the children of Northern Ireland in the future?

Mr M McGuinness: Much work has been done on this issue over some time. The work carried out by Prof Tony Gallagher and Prof Alan Smith at Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster made clear that the weaknesses of the current arrangements are unacceptable, and they must be addressed. Everybody, including the members of the Committee for Education, accepts that there is a need for change. Therefore, the status quo is not an option. The issue of academic selection must be addressed — that is at the heart of this debate.

There is a complacency about how well we perform compared with other countries. For example, the recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study of reading, mathematics and science showed that we performed no better than England and Scotland. We were well behind other industrialised countries. The top performers — countries such as Finland and New Zealand — had non-selective systems.

Of the countries surveyed, we also have one of the widest ranges of performance. Within these islands, Scotland, which has a comprehensive system, has as many pupils gaining five GCSEs at grades A* to C and a similar proportion of young people entering higher education. England, which is often caricatured as having a failed comprehensive system, has a higher proportion of pupils achieving five GCSE passes at grades A to G than here in the North. Although we have more pupils who gain higher grade passes than in England, we also have more pupils who gain few passes at any grade. That highlights the wide range of achievement created by our academically selective system. We must face up to the fact that it is a system that does very well for some but poorly for many.

Working Groups

6. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1444/01, to refrain from setting up working groups until such time as the consultation process on the Burns Report has been completed.

(AQO 789/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I will not be making any decisions about new arrangements until I have considered the comments received during the consultation period, which ends on 28 June. However, it is important that my officials consider and assess the implications of the Burns proposals across the full range of the Department of Education's responsibilities.

Mr Hamilton: Is the Minister aware that a growing number of headmasters, boards of governors and teachers are of the belief that working groups, committees and subcommittees have been established, and that those groups are working towards an outcome that has already been decided?

Is the Minister also aware that there is growing concern in large sections of the teaching profession that the present consultation exercise is really little more than a sham and a deliberate effort to suppress the excellence already being achieved within the system via grammar schools, an excellence unparalleled in the United Kingdom and Ireland?

2.45 pm

Mr M McGuinness: It is intended that working groups of officials will be established by the end of February. No decisions have been taken on any of the proposals in the Burns review, and no team has been set up to implement them. A small team comprising six officials, including support staff, has been established to manage the consultation, to receive and analyse comments and to introduce proposals for decisions in due course.

That consultation will be vital. I ask everybody with an interest in education to make a response to the consultation process by 28 June. It will be a real consultation. As an important aid to discussion, my Department intends to bring out a video which will be widely seen and will be followed by a pamphlet, which will be widely distributed, to give people an opportunity to respond on this important matter.

My Department is also looking at ways in which it can reach those who are less articulate and who might have difficulty responding. It intends to make the consultation process as easy as possible. The work is important and getting it right will be one of the most important tasks that the Assembly will have to face in its first term. Every Member has a responsibility to play his or her part. This is not about structures; it is about putting in place the best possible education system for children in a modern world. That is why I hope that there will be no politicking on the issue and that people will face up to the challenges and recognise that they can do a great service to society, teachers, pupils and parents by getting this right.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's answers. It is obvious from the supplementary questions from the other side of the House that there are many who do not see the need for change or recognise that the academic selection system has been a failure, even with the amount of consultation that has taken place so far — and there has been much consultation. Does the Minister think that consensus can be achieved on this?

Mr M McGuinness: I do not underestimate the enormity and complexity of the task. I have been encouraged by an emerging consensus on the guiding principles that should be the basis of any new system, especially that of valuing all children equally. Those guiding principles centre round ending the transfer tests, the value of pupil profiles and the value of collaboration and co-operation between schools.

We have a common goal, which is to ensure that our education system is capable of providing young people with opportunities to fulfil their potential and play a full role in society. We must all work together to achieve that. I want to achieve maximum consensus, but, as Minister of Education, I will not shirk my responsibility to take firm decisions that are in the best interests of all the children.

Capital Building Programme

7. **Mr B Bell** asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) how much funding will be available for the capital building programme in 2002-03; and (b) when he intends to announce the details; and to make a statement. (AQO 788/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Details of the next capital programme, and the funding for it, are still under consideration. However, I intend to announce the programme in March after consultation with the Committee for Education.

Mr B Bell: The Minister has recently visited at least one school with pressing capital building needs. Will he assure the House that all the other schools that he has not visited, and which are also facing severe accommodation difficulties — for example, those in my constituency of Lagan Valley — will receive fair and equitable consideration when decisions are made? How will the Minister achieve this?

Mr M McGuinness: We are very careful about how we move forward in all these matters, and I understand the sensitivities. However, the criteria and methodology for determining the school capital building programme are applied to all contenders. It is important that the education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and other schools authorities ensure at an early stage that their work on economic appraisals is sufficiently advanced for schools in their sectors to be considered for inclusion in the programme. The Department can consider schools only at that stage so that they can be assessed on their merits as regards educational need. That takes into account such factors as deficiencies in accommodation, the extent and condition of temporary accommodation, the ability of the school to meet the requirements of the curriculum, health and safety concerns in relation to mechanical, electrical and other areas of provision and the cost of maintaining the existing building fabric. This has to

reflect the fact that the cost has to be affordable and contained within the resources available.

I have visited schools with pressing accommodation requirements. Indeed, I have visited more than one school, and I am conscious of the backlog of work that has to be caught up on. Some £500 million would be required to even begin to examine all those issues. I am under no illusions about the great difficulties faced by all school sectors. However, I can assure the House that decisions about capital support for schools and the school capital building programme are made solely on the basis of educational need. The criteria that I have outlined are the way forward, and they have been arrived at in consultation with the schools' inspectorate, the education and library boards and the CCMS. I am also conscious of the situation in the Hillsborough area, and I am dealing with that as a matter of high importance.

Mr McGrady: I acknowledge the Minister's detailed listing of the criteria by which he will make a decision in March. He said that the bottom line is that decisions are made solely on the basis of educational need. Does that include the application of the Programme for Government's remit that it must also be rural and equality proofed? Does the Minister take that into consideration? If so, how will Johnny Citizen know that that has been taken on board, and in what way will it be open to discussion and constructive criticism? In other words, is there any meaning to rural proofing and the equality agenda in such decision-making?

Mr M McGuinness: The situation facing rural schools is particularly close to my heart. There is a responsibility on all of us to ensure that all schools are treated equally and that decisions are taken solely on the basis of educational need. Rurality of schools needs to be taken into account. I will be meeting the Committee for Education in the next couple of weeks, and we will discuss all those matters. It is important to be fair and to treat people with due respect. On my visits to schools, I have seen the great pressures that many boards of governors, schools authorities, principals, parents and teachers are under because of poor accommodation.

Accommodation is a high priority for my Department, and I have consistently fought the battle in the Executive for more resources. It is vital that we put in place proper accommodation so that we can offer the best possible environment for children to be educated in a sensible fashion. All those matters will be taken into account, but I must stress that the main criterion for the school capital building programme is educational need.

Mr Shannon: Will there be equity for schools in the controlled sector in the capital building programme for 2002-03? There is a perception in the Unionist community that it will always be second best when it comes to handing out money for schools. Will Comber

High School be included in the new build, as it urgently needs repairs? However, those repairs will fill the gap only in the short term.

Mr M McGuinness: I shall write to the Member about Comber High School, as I do not have that information to hand. The first point is an old chestnut that comes from a minority of Members. The allegations about the distribution of the school capital building programme fund are totally untrue and unjustified — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Poots: It is three to one.

Mr M McGuinness: The school capital building programme is determined on the basis of educational need, whether that be at controlled schools, voluntary schools or in any other school sector. I heard the point being made about “three to one”, so the Member who made that allegation should listen carefully. The make-up of this year’s conventional school building programme was six Catholic maintained school projects costing £25.7 million, 10 controlled school projects costing £24.1 million — including two special schools that were the top capital priorities of two education and library boards — and one grant-maintained integrated school costing £12.5 million. People who make such allegations need to examine those figures, and they need to be fair. They must stop peddling the nonsense that we will give preferential treatment to one school sector when decisions are taken about allocations to schools in the capital building programme. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our decisions on funding schools are based solely on educational need.

Noble Indicators

8. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Education if he has any plans to adopt the Noble indicators of multiple deprivation when assessing the needs of schools. (AQO 781/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I am totally committed to the application of New TSN principles to address social deprivation wherever it is found. My Department’s New TSN action plan includes an objective to improve the targeting and effectiveness of funding for schools in order to raise achievement levels. At present, I have no plans to adopt the Noble indicators when assessing schools’ needs. The needs of schools with high levels of socially disadvantaged pupils were addressed as part of my Department’s consideration of a common funding formula for schools. In that context, we examined the possibility of using Noble and other similar indicators as a means of allocating funds for social deprivation under the TSN factor in the proposed new common funding formula.

We need a robust and objective indicator, which is pupil oriented, to tackle social deprivation — principally

because pupils do not always attend their nearest school. The Noble indicators are location based and, therefore, cannot be used to target resources in schools with socially deprived children in attendance. Entitlement to free school meals remains the most robust indicator of social deprivation, and that is a view widely supported by schools in the recent consultation. I have stated my willingness to keep the issue under review and to utilise more effective indicators should they become available.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his response, although I am somewhat disappointed. Does the Minister agree that every effort should be made to ensure that schoolchildren from all backgrounds receive nothing but the best, so that they can contribute positively as they move into adulthood?

Mr M McGuinness: I agree that every child should be given the best possible opportunity. We have formed the view that New TSN principles must be addressed through establishing free school meals entitlement in schools. However, I have not closed my mind to other ideas or suggestions, and I reiterate that I am willing to keep the issue under review and to utilise more effective indicators — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am afraid that the Minister’s time is up, and time is up for questions to the Minister of Education.

3.00 pm

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr Speaker: Question 17, in the name of Mrs Mary Nelis, has been transferred to the Minister of Finance and Personnel and will receive a written answer.

Care for the Elderly

1. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action has been taken to provide free long-term care for the elderly residing in nursing homes. (AQO 801/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ciallaíonn reachtaíocht bheartaithe nua, a chuirfear os comhair an Tionóil go gairid, nach gcuirfear costas chúram altranais san áireamh nuair a bheidh cumas daoine díol as costas cúraim i dtithe altranais á mheasúnú ó Dheireadh Fómhair na bliana seo.

D’aontaigh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin fosta ag a gcruinniú an 3 Bealtaine 2001 gur chóir go mbunófaí sainghrúpa idir-ranna leis na himpleachtaí agus na costais a bhainfeadh le tabhairt isteach cúraim phearsanta

saor in aisce do chónaitheoirí tithe altranais agus tithe cónaithe a bhreithniú.

Proposed new legislation, which will come to the Assembly shortly, will mean that from this October the cost of nursing care will not be included when people's ability to contribute to the cost of being cared for in nursing homes is being assessed. At a meeting on 3 May 2001, the Executive agreed that an inter-departmental expert group should be established to examine the implications and costs of introducing free personal care for residential and nursing home residents and to report its findings to the Executive. The expert group has embarked on this work and will report to the Executive as soon as possible.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister agree that the present system discriminates against those persons who have been put upon throughout their lives by paying tax and National Insurance? Should they not expect to be entitled to free nursing and personal care in later life?

Ms de Brún: I accept that there is an anomaly in nursing care. It is supplied free of charge, as a health service, to a person in his or her own home or to a resident in a residential care home, if it is supplied externally by a trust via the community nursing service. A resident has to pay for nursing care in a nursing home only where the service is supplied as part of the overall cost.

To remove this inequitable position I propose that from this October the nursing care element of the total cost will be met from public funds, which will reduce the overall cost at an individual level. As regards personal care, I refer the Member to my first answer.

Mr Kane: What action will the Minister take to tackle the diabolically excessive increase in charges for patients in private nursing homes? What reassurance will she give to such patients?

Ms de Brún: This is an interesting supplementary question to draw out the idea of my proposals for free long-term care for the elderly. I would not have thought that the present tariffs were exactly in line with that. The measures I am proposing aim to reduce the overall cost of care to those in nursing homes by removing the nursing care element. However, the amount that any individual pays is a matter between them and the homes in which they reside.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. My question was answered in the reply given to Mr Armstrong's supplementary question.

Mr McGrady: I want to draw the Minister's attention to the lack of care provided by the Southern Health and Social Services Board, where elderly people and disabled children have had their services withdrawn

due to financial restrictions. Many elderly people have been left without any care, and care workers have been made unemployed. In the context of providing care, will the Minister indicate what action she can take to assist the board and the constituent trusts to provide care equal to that given in every other part of the Six Counties?

Mr Speaker: A huge number of Members asked to put supplementaries to the Minister on this question. It appears, however, that the supplementaries are somewhat tangential to the subject of the question. I must ask Members to stick to the original question. It is difficult enough when a large number of Members ask for supplementaries, but it is impossible to make a proper judgement when at least half of them are about something else. I must, therefore, move on.

Acute Services in Tyrone County Hospital

2. **Mr Gibson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there has been any diminution of acute services in Tyrone County Hospital since July 2001. (AQO 778/01)

Ms de Brún: Dearbhaíodh domh gur ghlac Bord an Iarthair agus Iontaobhas Speirín, Tír na Lochanna cibé céimeanna is gá le próifíl géarsheirbhísí ag Ospidéal Chontae Thír Eoghain a choinneáil.

Mar shampla, leithroinn an bord £200,000 breise go hathfhillteach le seirbhísí altranais ag Ospidéal Chontae Thír Eoghain agus na hÉirne a choinneáil; tugadh fostaíocht bhuan do roinnt foirne sealadaí; agus tá an tIontaobhas ag infheistiú £500,000 breise le seirbhísí a choinneáil, lena n-áirítear foireann bhreise in ainéistic, i bpéidiatric agus i raideolaíocht.

I have been assured that the Western Board and the Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Care Trust have taken such steps as are necessary to sustain the profile of acute services at Tyrone County Hospital. For example, the board has committed an extra £200,000 recurrently to sustaining nursing services at the Tyrone County Hospital and the Erne Hospital. A number of temporary staff have been made permanent, and the trust is investing an extra £500,000 to sustain services, which include the support of additional staff in anaesthesiology, paediatrics and radiology.

Mr Gibson: I find the Minister's answer most interesting. It does not explain why, at the joint meeting of Fermanagh and Omagh district councils on Wednesday last week, the chief executive of the Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Care Trust indicated that the Hayes Report would be implemented and that the intention was that Tyrone County Hospital would be run down. Will the Minister assure us that no one from her Department is advising him that that is the case while she is telling us otherwise?

Ms de Brún: First, the Member's question was about a diminution of acute services in Tyrone County Hospital since July 2001, and I had hoped that the supplementary question would bear some relation to that.

Secondly, under no circumstances has anyone given any indication other than that which I have reiterated here. After discussion in the Executive, proposals will be put out for consultation, an equality impact assessment will be carried out, and at that point during 2002 final decisions will be made. No decisions have been taken at this point.

Mr Hussey: At the risk of being tangential, and rather than allow the Minister to run around in circles, I will ask if she is aware that when services within Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Care Trust have been transferred from the Tyrone County Hospital in the past, the uptake has not reflected that expected in the conglomeration of the two services. Patients are voting with their feet, and in the Tyrone County Hospital side they are moving to another trust area for service.

Ms de Brún: Patients may vote with their feet, their cars, their buses or any other method of transport to avail of services. That is their right and their choice. However, the boards and trusts continually review their services to reflect demand, and they occasionally reconfigure services according to that demand. I have received an assurance from the trust that any sort of reconfiguration or realignment that takes place between winter and summer, or at any stage, to reflect demand will have no negative impact on patient safety or quality of care.

The board and the trust assure me that no distinction is made when considering the sustainability of the profiles in both hospitals pending the outcome of the acute hospitals review. That is what they have been asked to do, and they assure me that they are doing it.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister stand by the earlier commitment that the "bridge to the future" concept still pertains, so that the Tyrone County Hospital will not suffer a meltdown in acute services during the limbo period before a strategic decision is made by management? When does the Minister intend to pay an official visit to the Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh to meet the medical and nursing staff, who would appreciate such a visit, no doubt?

Ms de Brún: When I made an official visit to hospitals in Omagh and Enniskillen in December, the staff at both hospitals told me that they greatly appreciated my visit.

On sustaining services and profiles at the hospitals pending final decisions in 2002, officials are meeting senior officers at the Western Board and the Sperrin Lakeland Trust on a regular basis. I am satisfied that the board and the trust are taking the steps necessary

to secure services at both the Tyrone County and Erne Hospital sites. I reiterate that I have received assurances from the board and the trust that no distinction is being made when considering the sustainability of the profiles at those hospitals.

Junior Hospital Doctors' Working Hours

3. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the average number of hours worked by junior hospital doctors in the past year; (b) if this has improved since the previous year; and (c) any strategies she is adopting to deal with this issue. (AQO 798/01)

Ms de Brún: Tá grúpa feidhmithe (ISG) bunaithe ag mo Roinn le cuidiú le hiontaobhais cloí leis na teorainneacha ar uaireanta oibre agus riachtanais scíthe an réitigh nua d'uaireanta dochtúirí sóisearacha. Ó Lúnasa 2001 tá ISG ag obair le hiontaobhais agus le boird leis an réiteach nua a sholáthar agus le caighdeáin chóiríochta agus lónadóireachta a fheabhsú.

Information on the average number of hours worked by junior doctors in the past year is not available centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. My Department has established an implementation support group (ISG) to assist trusts to achieve compliance with the limits on hours of work and rest requirements in the new deal on junior doctors' hours.

Since August 2001, the ISG has been working with trusts and boards to deliver the new deal and improve accommodation and catering standards. Key members of the ISG are engaged in an intensive round of visits to the trusts to identify problems and to check that trusts have given sufficient priority to achieving the new deal. They are also assisting trusts by spreading good practice, which will help trusts to achieve compliance through facilitating changes in doctors' working patterns and practices and by instituting skill-mix initiatives where appropriate. The key priority for this year is to ensure that full compliance with new deal is achieved for all pre-registration house officer posts by August 2002.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for her answer, but the underlying problem of the failure to train enough doctors must be addressed urgently. The increase in the number of places in universities' medical schools is pitifully inadequate; junior doctors must therefore work long hours because there are not enough of them. That makes the profession increasingly unattractive to young people.

Ms de Brún: I agree with the Member's comments about the number of people who have been trained in the past. I have said on many occasions that the funding failures of the past meant that money which should have been put into the system for health and social services was taken out of it. In addition, money

and time were not invested in training, equipment and services for the community and its hospitals.

3.15 pm

That has left the Department without the flexibility and capacity that it needs. I concur with the Member's concerns about the impact that that has on junior doctors. I have met with junior doctors' representatives. The ISG is working to tackle the necessary arrangements. The Department is undertaking a major workforce planning exercise in order to ensure that the necessary investments in training for the future are made now.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Has the Minister met with junior doctors and listened to their concerns?

Ms de Brún: As I have said, I have met with junior doctors' representatives. I am closely monitoring the progress of the work of the ISG. The group is paying particular attention to the introduction of a range of initiatives that will enhance support for junior doctors and will reduce or eliminate inappropriate tasks being carried out by them. The junior doctors met with the Chief Medical Officer at the end of last year. They have frequent meetings at official level, one of which is scheduled for later this week. They have representation on the ISG, which meets quarterly. Liaison meetings with the chairperson of the group take place between meetings of the entire group.

Mr Speaker: When the Minister is considerate enough to give an answer in not one but two languages, I request that Members ensure that their supplementary questions do not ask the previous question again. The Minister did not answer in Ulster Scots. However, I hope that, when I call Mr Shannon to put his question, it will not be a repetition.

Mr Shannon: I shall put my question to the Minister in English. Will the Minister acknowledge that junior doctors, and indeed all doctors, work excessive hours? How many have needed time off due to overwork and stress? Is working those long hours against the trusts' guidelines?

Ms de Brún: I share the Member's concerns. A recent survey of all trusts and boards indicated that 70% of junior doctors are working in posts that are non-compliant with the hours and rest requirements of the new deal. That is why I have made certain that the work of the implementation support group, and any other work that can be done, will be done in order to meet those requirements. I commend the work of all of those who are working hard to ensure that arrangements are those that junior doctors and others should expect. This year's key priority is that full compliance with the new deal is achieved for all pre-registration house officer posts by August.

Ovarian Cancer Research Programme

4. **Ms Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the ovarian cancer research programme announced recently. (AQO 806/01)

Ms de Brún: Tagraíonn an fôgra a rinneadh le gairid ar thaighde ailse ubhagáin do thriail chomhoibritheach ar scagadh le haghaidh ailse ubhagáin a bhfuiltear ag tabhairt fúithi in Ospidéal Chathair Bhéal Feirste agus in ionaid ar fud Sasana, na hAlban agus na Breataine Bige. Mairfidh an triail 10 mbliana, agus féachfaidh sí lena léiriú go deimhneach an féidir le scagadh le haghaidh ailse ubhagáin beo a shábháil.

The recent announcement on ovarian cancer research refers to a collaboration trial of ovarian cancer screening, which is being undertaken at Belfast City Hospital and at centres throughout England, Scotland and Wales. The trial will run for 10 years. It seeks to show definitively whether screening for ovarian cancer can save lives.

Ms Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her answer. What does she hope to achieve from the trial?

Mr Speaker: If the Minister wishes to elaborate, I will happily give her the opportunity to do so, but she has given a clear answer about the purpose of the trial.

Mrs Nelis: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I do not take points of order during ministerial questions.

Ms Ramsey: I wanted to ask what the Minister hopes to achieve from the trial.

Mr Speaker: I heard the question. I also heard the answer, and I think that I have some knowledge of those things.

Minister, you may elaborate if you wish, although you should not feel compelled to do so.

Ms de Brún: As I said, the trial seeks to show definitively whether screening for ovarian cancer can save lives. Methods to detect ovarian cancer early have been developed, and the trial will determine how effective the screening tests are. It will be 2012 before final conclusions can be drawn. The importance of the trial lies in the fact that ovarian cancer is the fourth commonest cause of death from cancer among women here.

Investing for Health

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when she will publish the implementation plan for the 'Investing for Health' Report. (AQO 780/01)

Ms de Brún: Tá súil agam an straitéis 'Infheistíocht do Shláinte' a fhoilsiú an mhí seo chugainn.

I hope to publish the 'Investing for Health' strategy next month.

Mr McCarthy: It was such a short answer that I almost did not hear what the Minister said.

Mr Speaker: Perhaps if the House were a little quieter and more attentive to the Minister, the Member would have a chance to hear the Minister's concise answer.

Mr McCarthy: You are right, Mr Speaker.

Does the Minister agree that when targets are set, we expect action? Page 31 of the first Programme for Government, published in February 2001, stated that the public consultation for the 'Investing for Health' strategy was to be completed, and that by September 2001 an implementation plan was to be published. It is now February 2002, and we are still no further forward. With such dragging of feet, is it any wonder that the Health Service is in its current state?

Ms de Brún: The consultation period was to end on 10 April 2001. However, because of difficulties in organising consultation events in rural areas as a result of foot-and-mouth disease, it was decided to extend the consultation period until 31 May. Even I am not responsible for foot-and-mouth disease. In the last plenary debate before the Christmas recess, one Member suggested that I was almost responsible for the Ulster fry and the amount that people in Ireland drink. However, to hold me responsible for foot-and-mouth disease is to take a step too far.

In addition, the ministerial group on public health agreed that a feedback conference would form an integral part of the consultation process, as that would inform respondents about the outcomes of the consultation and provide a final opportunity for comment. Having extended the consultation period until 31 May, it was not then feasible, if community representatives were to be included, to hold that conference during the summer. The conference was eventually held on 5 October.

The development of the strategy has since involved the co-ordination of input from all Departments, and the consideration of the draft strategy by a quality assurance group. As the Member knows, I chair the ministerial group on public health. Representatives on that group also include senior officials from every Executive Department. It will consider the final draft of the strategy at its meeting on Wednesday before submitting it to the Executive for approval.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I am sure that the Minister's report 'Investing for Health' will refer to measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccinations. Serious complications are associated with those diseases, and children's health must be paramount. We understand the uncertainty of many parents about

the safety of the MMR vaccine. Does the Minister agree that overwhelming evidence and research, including that from the World Health Organization, shows that MMR — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. If Members are trying to ask a supplementary question, they should try to find one that is at least relevant to the substantial question. The whole House accepts that the Chairperson's question is important. However, the connection with the substantive question is tenuous to say the least. It would be unfair of me to permit the Member to continue.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Níl Ulster Scots ná Ullans agam, ach bainfidh mé triail as an Ghaeilge. An féidir leis an Aire insint dúinn cá mhéad ama a mheastar a bhéas riachtanach leis an phlean seo a chur i bhfeidhm?

After the consultation on the report and its finalisation, will the Minister indicate what timescale is involved in the implementation of the 'Investing for Health' plan?

Ms de Brún: Consultation was covered in my response to Mr McCarthy's question. The implementation strategy will have several stages, but we see it as the future way of working. For it to succeed, there must be an effective partnership at every level. For the foreseeable future the ministerial group on public health will work with a variety of Departments to ensure that health factors are given due consideration in all areas of responsibility. In addition, the four health and social services boards will also lead local 'Investing for Health' partnerships to identify opportunities to improve the health of the people in their area by addressing the social, cultural, economic and environmental determinants of health. They will develop long-term, local, cross-sectoral health improvement plans, again with short-term and longer-term targets. In the statutory sector, district councils, the Housing Executive, education and library boards, and health and social services trusts will all be included in those partnerships. Beyond those core members, the composition of the partnerships will be determined locally and is likely to evolve over time. The idea behind that is that in future the work of the strategy will become an integral part of the planning and outworking of policy in all areas — not only in health.

Some implementation is immediate. I will shortly announce the community grants programme. Some will take slightly longer; the setting up of local partnerships will take place in the coming months. The most important part will be to establish a new way of working, in keeping with the Executive's Programme for Government. For the foreseeable future interim targets will be regularly monitored.

Care of Special-School Leavers

6. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any discussions

she has had with the Department of Education regarding the care of young people leaving schools such as Hillcroft Special School, Newtownabbey, at the age of 19.

(AQO 784/01)

Ms de Brún: Ní raibh aon phlé agam leis an Roinn Oideachas faoin ábhar seo.

Tá na socruithe le freastal ar riachtanais chúram sláinte daoine óga a fhágann scoileanna speisialta leagtha amach in alt 5 den Acht Daoine Míchumasacha (Tuaisceart Éireann) 1989. Soláthraíonn ‘Cód Cleachtais d’Aithint agus do Mheasúnú Riachtanas Speisialta Oideachas’ treoir faoi conas is cóir na socruithe a dhéanamh.

I have had no discussion with the Department of Education on that matter. Arrangements for meeting the continuing healthcare needs of young people leaving special schools are set out in section 5 of the Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1989. The Department of Education’s code of practice for the identification and assessment of special educational needs provides guidance on how such arrangements should be made. It is for the relevant education and library board to identify those leaving special schools and to inform the appropriate health and social services trust. In turn, the trust is responsible for assessing need and arranging for the necessary services to be provided.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her reply, which focused with procedures but dealt very little with the individuals who are clearly in need. Will she agree that there is a significant underprovision of places in day care for adults with learning disabilities? That is compounded by the difficulties of managing centres with increasing numbers of elderly people as well as young adults. Is she aware that approximately 40 minutes ago in the Chamber, the Minister of Education gave an undertaking that education and library boards might offer facilities to health and social services trusts outside school hours, subject to local agreement? If so, will she follow up that ministerial initiative and ensure that funds are provided to community health and social services trusts to enable the use of school facilities to provide for adults whose age excludes them from the remit of special schools?

3.30 pm

Ms de Brún: I am aware of the pressure on statutory day care facilities, particularly as a result of the factors that the Member raised, and also because of the increasing number of people with severe disabilities who are unable to access alternative day facilities.

It is for the health and social services boards and trusts to assess need and provide the appropriate range and volume of services. That is why I outlined the arrangements in my opening answer. Those arrangements are between the education and library boards and the health and social services boards and trusts, and I am certain that

the boards and trusts will wish to follow up any suggestion of facilities that might be made available. That raises the question of whether that would automatically mean that they could provide appropriate facilities or that there would be funding available for them. They need to examine all that.

It is for the relevant boards and trusts to inform themselves of the needs of those leaving special schools in their areas and to plan to meet those needs. I understand that funding is needed for day care and for a range of other health and social services, and I will examine that with a view to allocating additional funding in 2002-03. I will announce my decisions in due course.

Mr J Wilson: Does the Minister agree that all young people leaving special education should be entitled to a full-time place at an adult facility or day centre in order to continue to avail of the opportunities that were created for them at the special school? I am thinking, in particular, of the Riverside School in Antrim. It has a high reputation, but it cannot send its pupils, on leaving, to the local day centre, which is advising in advance that it will be unable to admit them.

Ms de Brún: I am aware of several schools; those mentioned are both in the Homefirst Community Health and Social Services Trust area. That trust is planning how best to meet the needs of those who they know are leaving special schools in the area. Those needs include social work support, day care, respite care and a challenging-behaviour service. As I said in answer to the previous supplementary question, the availability of resources is an issue, and I will consider it.

The Homefirst Community Health and Social Services Trust advises me that it has identified those young people who will transfer to adult services, and it is planning to meet their needs.

Mr Speaker: Order. The time for questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is up.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Mr Speaker: The Minister of Finance and Personnel makes another appearance. Even after this, his work will not be over.

I wish to inform the House that question 6, in the name of Mr Gibson, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer. Question 12, in the name of Mr McGrady, has been withdrawn and no longer requires an answer.

Peace II Funding

1. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures are in place to ensure that

Peace II funding is distributed equitably across all sections of the community. (AQO 823/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): All areas, groups and sectors will have an equal opportunity to access Peace II funding. Equality of opportunity and balanced intervention are among several horizontal principles that govern the way in which the Peace II programme will be implemented. Furthermore, in accordance with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Special EU Programmes Body has a responsibility to promote equality of opportunity.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair)

Mr Poots: That being the case, perhaps the Minister will explain the situation in Lisburn. Funding was not distributed equally the last time: the Protestant community did not get its fair allocation. The new board does not reflect the balance in the community. Its chairperson and deputy chairperson are Roman Catholic, although the community is 70% Protestant. Coming from a background of unfair allocations, how can we expect equity and equality in the community? How does the Minister expect the public to have any confidence in the process?

Dr Farren: Members will appreciate that I did not have any responsibility for the matters that the Member seems to be pointing to.

However, I would be very concerned if there were any substantial evidence to back up the Member's remarks. If he has any such evidence, he should make it available to me. In my initial response, I indicated that the Executive have a clear, firm and explicit obligation to respect all equality requirements when allocating EU Peace II programme funds. That applies to EU funds and to all expenditure for which the Executive are responsible, and it applies across the board when allocating any form of public funding. Again, without evidence that would enable me to make a judgement, it is impossible for me to answer the question.

Dr McDonnell: How will Peace II resources be targeted?

Dr Farren: Peace II resources will be targeted on areas, sectors and groups that have been adversely affected by the conflict over the past 30 years. Those will include areas that were disadvantaged by the conflict, interface areas, victims and their families, ex-prisoners and their families, young people, women, older workers, and sectors or activities in business, the arts and sports that have been adversely affected by the conflict.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. How does the Minister expect Peace II funding to be distributed equitably, given that it is based on need — rather than religion, as the DUP may suggest — and given that district council areas west of

the River Bann have seen a decrease in the allocation of Peace II funding?

Dr Farren: I have made it clear that funds are allocated on the basis of equality with due respect to the requirements set out in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Member will be aware — and members of the Committee for Finance and Personnel will be even more aware — of the considerable amount of consultation and discussion that has taken place on the basis on which allocations would be made, for example, to local strategic partnerships in the current round of Peace II funding allocations. The indicators were agreed by the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Executive, which therefore includes the Ministers from the Member's party.

Official Cars

2. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the funding arrangements in place for the use of official cars by Ministers in the Executive. (AQO 808/01)

Dr Farren: The Department of Finance and Personnel funds the provision of official transport for 10 of the 14 Ministers. Different funding arrangements apply to the transport for the First Minister and the Ministers for Regional Development, Education and Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his reply. Like the rest of us, I am sure that the Minister is desirous of keeping down the cost of official transportation for Ministers. Is he satisfied that the most cost-effective arrangements are in place, particularly bearing in mind the relative cost of using official chauffeurs and contracted outside firms?

Dr Farren: I am satisfied that that is the case. A comparison of the costs of the alternative arrangements for providing official transport concluded that there were substantial savings — £300,000 in a full year — to be had from maintaining an in-house service as opposed to a contracted service. The average cost per hour for in-house provision was found to be approximately £7 less than the service provided by a contractor.

Green Purchasing Policies

3. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement on the Executive's plans to implement green purchasing policies throughout Government Departments. (AQO 771/01)

Dr Farren: The procurement review team's report, which has been subject to public consultation, includes recommendations aimed at ensuring that environmental issues are integrated into public procurement policy.

The contributions to the consultation exercise are being considered together with the team's recommendations, and I will bring forward policy proposals to the Executive in due course.

Ms Lewsley: Will the Minister outline the environmental policy currently operated by the Department?

Dr Farren: Each Department is responsible for examining the environmental impact of its activities, including procurement, as set out in the Northern Ireland Civil Service policy statement on green housekeeping. In my Department, where it is intended that the Government Purchasing Agency (GPA) should purchase goods or services specifically mentioned in the policy document, the appropriate environmental criteria are included in contract documentation. In addition, the Government Purchasing Agency tender documentation encourages suppliers to adopt positive environmental policies.

Mr Hussey: The Minister will be aware that great efforts are being made by his ministerial Colleague Mr Foster, and by district councils, to promote waste minimisation, recycling and so on. Is the Minister aware that the market for recycled products is one of the concerns as to the viability of recycling? In the interests of having a cross-cutting policy, would it not be circumspect for the Assembly, and government in general, to adopt a policy of using recycled paper and other materials?

Dr Farren: I take on board the points that Mr Hussey has made. Where Departments and Government agencies are not respecting policy set down in the guidelines in the Northern Ireland Civil Service green housekeeping document, I would be anxious to ensure that henceforth they do.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In the implementation of purchasing policies for Government Departments, has the Minister considered credit unions, as well as banks, with regard to financial arrangements within the Assembly?

Dr Farren: The question strays outside the parameters of the original issue, which was related to public procurement. Nonetheless, I am sympathetic to the credit union movement, and where it can be facilitated by Government finances, I am sure that the matter will receive sympathetic consideration.

Noble Indicators

4. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline whether the Noble indicators of multiple deprivation have been rural and TSN-proofed before being used for allocating resources and EU funds. (AQO 770/01)

Dr Farren: The Noble research was designed to measure deprivation in urban and rural areas by

selecting indicators that are applicable to both. The measures will inform the spatial targeting of programmes and will contribute to the application of targeting social need throughout government. The indicators that make up the measures, and the measures themselves, were agreed by all members of the Executive — including the two Ministers from Mr Molloy's party — prior to the publication of the report in July 2001.

Mr Molloy: Ceist uimhir a ceathair. First, I must correct something that the Minister said previously. The Committee for Finance and Personnel did not agree the allocations — in fact, the Committee opposed the allocations because they were linked not only to the Noble indicators but also to population. How does the Minister propose to target social need, particularly west of the Bann — an area that has been depopulated as a result of the role of successive British Governments and Unionist regimes? Currently, population is used as a measure, along with the Noble indicators, which do not target social need.

How does he explain the exclusion of large areas that were targeted by Noble as being deprived? The allocations to the district partnership boards have been reduced by £1 million.

3.45 pm

Dr Farren: I said earlier that there was widespread consultation on the Noble indicators, and that the Committee was involved in that consultation. It received presentations from officials in my Department. I will examine Hansard, and if I was inaccurate, I will ensure that that is corrected. I stressed that agreement on the use of the indicators was reached in the Executive, which includes two Ministers from the Member's party. I reiterate that point, because in an earlier debate Mr McGrady raised the matter of collective responsibility. We need to ensure that collective responsibility for Executive decisions is fully respected.

The development of the Noble indicators was a complex process. The index includes all the factors related to deprivation, and, appropriately, it relates those factors to the size of the population of an area. The allocations are then made on the basis of the indicators that are provided for each district council area. There has been concern about the matter, but the Member can receive again, through his Committee, a detailed presentation of all the issues related to the Noble indicators, if he and his Committee so wish. All Members are invited to gain information on how the indicators and the factors related to them were arrived at, and on their application.

Mr Cobain: Further to that answer, if Departments are using the Noble indicators of multiple deprivation in spending reviews and to influence decisions, why is the Minister of Education using different indicators in

spending programmes? Does the Minister agree that the indicators should have been subject to a full, open debate in the House, and will he give a commitment to have such a debate?

Dr Farren: I cannot possibly answer the first part of the Member's question. It must be directed to the Minister identified in the question.

Mr Cobain: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No points of order are allowed.

Dr Farren: The Member, in his question, asked me to speak on behalf of the Minister of Education about the issues that he raised. I cannot do that.

As I said before, the Noble indicators were developed and agreed as the basis upon which the allocations under Peace II programmes would be made. It is not possible to reopen the basis upon which those allocations are made. As I said in my previous response, Members can become fully informed about all the factors related to deprivation that inform the development of the Noble indicators. That would at least help Members to understand that, as a result of the widespread consultation, there seems to have been wide acceptance of the weighting of all those factors, in rural and urban areas.

I recognise that the way in which they are working out seems to cause concern. However, if Members wish to be as fully informed as possible on what has gone into making these indicators up, I will be only too happy to make that information available from my Department.

European Moneys

5. **Ms Morrice** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether European moneys have been returned to Brussels as a result of underspend and whether these moneys would be redirected to areas in need.

(AQO 785/01)

Dr Farren: No European money has been returned to the Commission as a result of underspending from the structural funds programmes for Northern Ireland. Funds in structural funds programmes can be redirected only within the guidelines and regulations laid down by the European Commission.

Ms Morrice: I thank the Minister for that response. I would like an explanation, therefore, of the numerous occasions on which the Budget and the Supplementary Estimates for Peace and Reconciliation funding — Peace I — have been reduced. By how much has that been reduced across all Departments? Can the Minister give us guarantees that that money will not go back to Brussels? Can it be used to bridge the gap between Peace I and Peace II? It was my understanding that if moneys were not spent by the end of a

certain period, which was last December, they would go back.

Dr Farren: I can assure the Member that it is expected that all moneys related to Peace I will be spent as planned. It is in the nature of the way in which funding is drawn down from Europe that money is drawn down against expenditure and, therefore, that there is no question of a return. However, I want to underline that it is anticipated that all of the planned expenditure will take place.

Mr McMennamin: What monitoring arrangements are in place to ensure that underspent money is directed where it is needed, particularly to areas such as Strabane and west Tyrone, which lost out in Peace II funding?

Dr Farren: The treatment of structural funds expenditure is based on the principle that receipts from the European Community should be managed, disbursed and monitored in exactly the same way, and using the same systems, as our own public expenditure. The basic principles of Government accounting apply to European Community receipts. In Northern Ireland the community structural fund monitoring committee has an overarching role across our structural funds programmes to ensure effective implementation and value for money.

Absenteeism Levels

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to explain (a) why administrative officers' absenteeism at 10% should be almost 3% higher than the levels for civil servant grades above and below that grade; and (b) what action is being taken to manage such high absenteeism levels. (AQO 820/01)

Dr Farren: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has developed robust statistics to help Departments identify underlying trends and areas for more in-depth analysis by age, grade and gender. For example, those statistics revealed that the female absence rate is twice as high as the male one, and that has an impact on absenteeism at the level of administrative officer, which is predominately female. A copy of the report 'Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Departments, 2000-01' by NISRA is available in the Assembly Library.

My Department also assists other Departments in tackling absenteeism through a range of corporate initiatives, including the development of a web site called 'Attendance Matters' for staff and managers. Service-wide seminars and workshops on managing attendance, as well as an awareness leaflet on support and early-return mechanisms, are available to Northern Ireland Civil Service staff. However, in that context it is important to bear in mind that approximately 80% of all lost working days were supported by a doctor's certificate.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the news that the Minister is taking the matter seriously, that web sites are being developed and that additional training is being provided. Does the Minister agree that such high levels of absenteeism are unacceptable? They are almost three times higher than those in the private sector, as illustrated in a recent Confederation of British Industry (CBI) survey. Furthermore, will he confirm that high levels of absenteeism place additional burdens and stresses on those members of the Civil Service who are at work serving the general public?

Dr Farren: This is an issue that must be approached sympathetically. It is notoriously difficult to carry out meaningful comparisons with other organisations, in both the public and the private sectors, for a variety of reasons. Sick absence rates are often calculated on a different basis and do not allow for factors such as the gender and age profile or the volume of part-time working to be taken into account, all of which have been shown to have an impact on absenteeism rates. Similarly, a recent CBI survey identified that company size is a key determinant of absence rates, with the smallest firms having a sick absence rate of approximately 40% less than the largest ones.

I can assure the Member that Departments are not at all complacent about this. As he acknowledged in his question, action is being taken to address some of the areas in which absenteeism is at its highest.

Magherafelt Bypass

8. **Rev Dr William McCrea** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will give an undertaking to provide adequate finances to the Department for Regional Development in order to secure the Magherafelt bypass. (AQO 774/01)

Dr Farren: I wonder whether I should be flattered by the amount of authority that the Member's question seems to invest in me with respect to funding for the bypass at Magherafelt. Funding of Roads Service capital schemes and prioritising spending of the capital budget for roads are matters for the Minister for Regional Development in the first instance, and not for the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Any request by a Minister for additional funding is a matter for consideration by the Minister of Finance and Personnel and, indeed, the whole Executive.

Rev Dr William McCrea: The Minister should not flatter himself too much. He should understand that the roads' infrastructure throughout the Province is in a state of grave neglect. The Executive must give higher priority to the Department for Regional Development when funds are being allocated to enable schemes such as the Magherafelt bypass to become a reality. It has been in the 15-year programme for many years. I

am not asking the Minister in any way to suggest which road or scheme should have higher priority, but the allocations of money made by his Department to the Department for Regional Development are vital to getting this road built.

Dr Farren: The Member may appreciate that I am too humble a person to flatter myself. I was suggesting that he might be flattering me.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: What would he do that for?

Dr Farren: The Member better ask him. He is his party leader. Perhaps Dr McCrea is thinking about changing his mind on some issues.

However long a particular proposal or scheme is in the pipeline, ultimately the responsibility for making the case for it has to fall to the Minister responsible. Perhaps the question in the first instance might have been better directed to the Minister for Regional Development, who, I understand, is still a Colleague of the Member.

Peace II Programme

9. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of applications received under measure 2.1 of the Peace II European Support Programme; and to make a statement on the success of the online completion of applications. (AQO 811/01)

Dr Farren: Applications to this measure are ongoing. To date, 25 have been formally submitted, of which 13 were submitted online and 12 manually. A further 55 online applications have been initiated under this measure.

4.00 pm

The application form is in two parts. Part A can be completed either online or manually, and part B must be completed manually. The online application process is working well, with some 3,900 applications initiated. A total of 1,603 applications have been submitted formally for building sustainable prosperity and Peace II, of which 1,014 are for Peace II.

Mr M Murphy: Can the Minister say if there were any drawbacks for online applications because of the closing date in December? Were any communities hindered?

Dr Farren: There were no inhibitions or hindrances to applicants. There was heavy online traffic towards the closing date for receipt of applications, which made it difficult to gain access. However, steps have been taken to address that problem, and no applicants have been inhibited from making an appropriate application.

Mr O'Neill: There was some concern about community organisations not having access to the Internet. Can the Minister assure the House that that was not a

problem and that it did not affect those who wished to apply using the traditional method?

Dr Farren: Applications can be made in the traditional way. The 12 paper applications referred to in my main reply were submitted using the traditional method, and both methods of application were equally acceptable.

NHS Funding

10. **Mr Cobain** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in view of the underspend in the NHS in the last financial year, to outline what mechanisms are in place to ensure that additional departmental budget allocations are spent in-year. (AQO 809/01)

Dr Farren: The Executive are determined to ensure that resources, once allocated, are spent where they are most needed. That is achieved through the in-year monitoring process, where spending is monitored by Departments with significant underspends — actual or forecast — being notified to the Department of Finance and Personnel on four specified occasions. At each point any spare capacity is reallocated, at the discretion of the Executive, to other pressures that may have arisen in other spending programmes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. The Minister will reply in writing to any supplementary questions.

We will resume the debate — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Cobain: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

In his reply, the Minister said that the Noble indices were being used to target and spend departmental moneys. The Minister of Education is not using the Noble indicators as a way of spending departmental moneys, and that issue needs to be raised.

On a further point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister of Education said that he had consulted widely before coming to the conclusion that the Nobel indices were the best way of indicating social deprivation. The House has not had a chance to debate those issues, even though there has been wide consultation outside the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a matter for the Minister of Finance and Personnel but rather for the Minister of Education. I strongly suggest that you take up the matter with the relevant Minister.

Mr Cobain: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. There is supposed to be collective responsibility in the Executive. We are supposed to have spending programmes that run through all the Departments. That cannot happen if each Minister is using different indices to tackle social deprivation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I repeat: take the matter up with the relevant Minister.

SUPPLY RESOLUTIONS:

SPRING SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES (2001-02) AND VOTE ON ACCOUNT (2002-03)

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a further sum not exceeding £198,035,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2002 and that further resources, not exceeding £574,419,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2002 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 2(b) and 3(b) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2001-02 that was laid before the Assembly on 11 February 2002. — *[The Minister of Finance and Personnel.]*

The following motion also stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £3,936,009,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2003 and that resources, not exceeding £4,486,387,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2003 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2002-03 document that was laid before the Assembly on 11 February 2002. — *[The Minister of Finance and Personnel.]*

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has recommended over and over again that there should be an increase in Budget funds for animal disease compensation. I am glad that that problem has been mentioned in the Supplementary Estimates, and that there has been a call for extra funding. Neither I nor anyone else wants to be involved in the enormous subsidisation of a disease. We want the disease to be eradicated. However, the situation in the Province as regards brucellosis and TB is serious, and incidences of those diseases are on the rise.

The Public Accounts Committee has highlighted the cost of brucellosis. However, TB is also an expensive

disease. At a recent meeting of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, it was revealed that £9.3 million had been paid in compensation for brucellosis, and £9 million for TB. An additional sum of £8.24 million was spent on testing and compensation administration costs. The Committee asked the question: if that is the expenditure, and the diseases are spreading, does the Department have the finances to continue to compensate farmers if their herds have those diseases? The reply was that the money would run out.

I want to know whether the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, having taken a reading of what will happen with regard to those diseases, and if they continue to spread, has asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if the money will be there? I am sure that the Minister of Finance and Personnel, coming from a rural district, knows what farmers would think if they had those diseases on their farms and animals had to be slaughtered. What will a farmer think if his neighbour receives compensation, and the Department turns round and tells him that the kitty has run out? Has the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development made the Minister officially aware of this problem? Is the request for increased finance likely to be enough to deal with the situation?

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Member appreciate that there are several farmers in Northern Ireland whose herds have been scrutinised by departmental officials, and that those officials, having evaluated the herds, have indicated in writing their value and, after the herd has been slaughtered, have withdrawn those offers of compensation? Does the Member accept that that causes severe problems for the image of the Department in the farming community, and severe problems for farmers in their relations with the banks?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I am aware of such situations, because they have happened in my constituency, which my son also represents in the House. We are all aware of such situations, and they constitute a serious matter. An even worse case was presented to me today. There was a foot-and-mouth disease scare, and the sale of certain cattle had been agreed.

The animals were not paid for, but they were moved to the purchaser's farm. However, the Department slaughtered all of them before he could pay for them. The man said that he had not paid for the animals, that they belonged to so-and-so and that therefore, technically, he was the owner. The owner then wrote to the Department and said that his herd had been slaughtered without his being informed. He said that he expected compensation, but the Department said that it could not pay him.

Those are the constituency matters that we deal with, and that is why it is so important that we know exactly what is happening. We take these matters up with the Minister and the Department because that is

the first place we can go. We cannot expect the Finance Minister, with all his talents, brains and flatteries, to wave a magic wand. However, it is a matter of grave concern for farmers, and we should be concerned about the spread of brucellosis and TB. There was a time when the incidence of brucellosis and TB in the Province was very low. We have lost out badly. We need to eradicate diseases rather than compensate farmers with those diseases on their farms, and provision must be made for that.

My Committee has questioned if money will be available should the Minister decide that the vision report is to be acted upon and that the recommendations from the report are to move from the page and become reality. We have been told that there is no money available. The Minister set up a body to introduce important proposals on difficult situations in agriculture, yet no provision has been made to make money available to introduce the report's recommendations. That too is very important.

There is a matter I wish to raise without wearing my Chairperson's hat, although all members of the Committee are concerned about it. There is a need for a retirement scheme and a new entrants scheme for farmers. On the opposite Bench another man with great talents also raised the issue — and how could he not be with great talents, for we both sit in another place together? He made a very strong plea on the matter, and I want to back that up. There are men who have spent their days, and hoped to end their days quite comfortably, in farming, but that hope has been smashed. We all know about the state of agriculture. Can these men, in the last days of their lives, not retire with dignity and honour and have enough to live comfortably for whatever years are left to them? Is it unreasonable for us to say that they should?

We also need new entrants, but many of the regulations that govern agriculture put a barricade in their way. We must oil the hinges, take off the locks, open the door and let new entrants in with a helping hand so that they can get to a place where they can earn a living from the soil.

This is an important issue, and I trust that the Minister will soon announce that it has been considered and that money will be available so that we can have a proper retirement scheme. It will cost a great deal of money, but new entrants to farming will ensure that the industry has a future.

4.15 pm

I hope that the next time we discuss this matter we will have good news about brucellosis and tuberculosis. People are working hard and are spending time carrying out tests and investigations. This is an important matter — £8.24 million has been spent. This will be a thorough review of the situation, and I hope that they

are successful. It is to be hoped that we will have the pleasant knowledge that brucellosis and tuberculosis have been conquered.

Mr Close: It has been said that a year is a long time in politics, and that time passes very quickly when one is enjoying oneself. It does not feel like a year since the last time we were discussing spring Supplementary Estimates, which was on 19 February 2001. I stress that date, and I ask Members to bear it in mind.

I remember the date vividly. At that time I drew attention to the need for change in how the Assembly went about its budgets and Supplementary Estimates. I remember drawing attention to the need for Members to have more time to analyse, scrutinise and deal with the topic in front of them. I also drew attention to the need for proper consultation, openness and transparency. I referred to the cold, harsh fact that we see the results of monitoring rounds retrospectively — as a *fait accompli*.

At that time, the then Minister acknowledged these shortcomings, and he pointed out that resource accounting was coming on board and that it would enhance the accountability of Departments and help to address many concerns raised by Members. Today is 11 February 2002 — less than a year has passed. We have had less time to give the matter full scrutiny and less time for consultation. As I stressed, the equivalent debate last year took place on 19 February.

We have a full set of resource accounts for this year's spring Supplementary Estimates. We have masses of figures in front of us — and I concede that point most willingly. However, I also openly admit to being more than a little blinded by the science of these figures. Again, I stress that more time should have been afforded to Members to properly get their heads around the new system of resource accounting.

It has been said that it is an improved system, and I acknowledge that. However, the system is improved only if it enlightens Members and helps them understand — on behalf of the taxpayer — the intricacies and accountability that is necessary if we are to perform a proper service on behalf of those who send us here.

It is a complex system; a fact that has been recognised by the Minister, and I thank him for that recognition. However, we must continue to press, at Committee level and on the Floor of the House, for more transparency rather than allow transparency to appear to be an illusion.

The spring Supplementary Estimates are effectively the consolidation of a done deal that, through the associated Budget Act, will provide the legislative authority to the Executive to spend taxpayers' money.

I stress again that we need to keep the pressure on, on the Floor of the House and at Committee level, in an attempt to prise open the vice-like grip on information that is held by someone or other.

Last year, I highlighted other similarities, and I must question them again this year. The total figure in the Supplementary Estimate last year was £196 million — approximately 2% to 2.5% of the Main Estimate. I drew attention to that figure, as it was similar in percentage terms to that of the previous year. The figure this year is £198 million of cash required. Are these figures an amazing coincidence — is it lightning striking, not once or twice, but three times? Or are these figures, as I suspect, a planned calculation?

I was advised last year that different factors that could not be predicted led to Supplementary Estimates of 2% to 2.5% of Main Estimate provisions. That may well be so, but I am not convinced that the current system leads to the best use of taxpayers' money. I will expand on that point.

Members may recall that last year I called on each Department to consider releasing £10 million of its budget to assist in the crisis in the Health Service. That would have produced an additional £100 million to ease that crisis. The Ministers responded with shock and horror. I was told that it could not be done; it could not be afforded. The Executive acknowledged that health was recognised as a priority, and we all endorsed it, yet the other Departments needed every single penny they could get their hands on and knew how they were going to spend it on important issues. Yet, today, in the consolidation of the monitoring rounds, £198 million of easements are available in the system for reallocation.

The Minister said that monitoring rounds are effectively short-term money. I accept that.

Mr McCartney: Does the Member agree that when a financial crisis or issue arises in one of the Departments, miraculously, as I once described it, millions of pounds can be found down the side of the sofa and behind the clock? Is that what the Member is referring to?

Mr Close: That is my point. I will go further than that. We have such a crisis in our number one priority that greater effort needs to be made in the lead-up to the beginning of the year to ensure that sufficient funds are allocated to that priority to deal with the pressures. We all know that those pressures are going to build up throughout the year.

As I said before, each Department can put up a good argument as to why it should receive more money. That is not disputed — Northern Ireland has been underfunded for years. However, if we believe in a number one priority, then the Assembly must back up those words with resources. That has not been done, and continues to be neglected.

Lead-in for financial resources requires time and planning to enable money to be spent. That is nowhere more obvious than in the Health Service. Over the past

two years the funding has not been made available, and the crisis is getting worse.

Recently, I received a letter from the chairperson of the Northern Ireland office of the British Medical Association (BMA) which stated that

“the crisis within the Health Service in Northern Ireland is escalating ... I write to you to highlight the deep frustration and concern felt throughout the medical profession about the continuing crisis within the health service in Northern Ireland”.

The letter makes several recommendations. I hope that all Members will concur with the recommendation that there should be an immediate review of the system of allocating funding in Northern Ireland, with the aim of replacing it with a more effective and accountable system. We should all say, “Hear, hear” to that. We have an opportunity to try to ensure that money is given according to our aspirations.

If we continue to follow what the previous Minister of Finance called “the silo mentality”, we will continue to push the problem down the pipe, rather than resolving it. We continue to fail to give proper prioritisation to the need for spending where it is needed. It hurts me that the Executive are still reticent to examine, recognise and grasp the necessity to implement the necessary changes. I hear words, but, after several years, I must question their sincerity.

We have a new Minister of Finance. However, to clarify my point about words, when the Finance Committee was dealing with the Budget Bill, it received a letter on 15 February 2001 from the Department of Finance and Personnel and signed by the then Minister, Mr Durkan. It says that

“We have sought to provide as full a scope for discussion with the Committee for Finance and Personnel as has been possible in the context of this financial year. I will want to work with the Committee to provide for further analysis and discussion of these issues in future and to continue to improve the approach for future years as far as possible. I am very grateful for the assistance of the Committee on these issues.”

On 5 February 2002, the Committee received a letter from the new Minister, Mr Farren, which stated

“We have sought to provide as full a scope for discussion with the Committee for Finance and Personnel as has been possible in the context of this financial year. I will want to work with the Committee to provide for further analysis and discussion of these issues in future, and to continue to improve the approach for future years as far as possible. I am very grateful for the assistance of the Committee on these issues.”

Members will recognise that those paragraphs are identical. I read them out to illustrate my point and to ask where the new thinking is. I want to stress the necessity for new thinking, rather than the repetition of words that are often meaningless. It is time for new thinking and for new ideas to be put to the test, rather than to continue with the patterns and the words of the past. It is time for change.

Mr McGrady called for new funds from outside Northern Ireland. I accept his points. Greater priority must be given to the needs of Northern Ireland, on a UK, a European and a worldwide basis. We are told that money is scarce. However, we have seen billions of pounds spent on war and killing, while the Health Service continues to crumble.

I have just received the ‘Service Agreement Monthly Monitoring Report’ for December 2001 from the Eastern Health and Social Services Board. With regard to fractures, it says that

“In late December early January the fracture figures began to escalate again. This situation was deemed critical”.

Turning to operating theatres, it says that

“The difficulties with theatre staffing in the Trust mean that many elective lists are having to be cancelled routinely”.

On in-patient and day-case waiting lists by specialty and waiting times, it says that

“At 31 December 2001, there were 29,952 EHSSB residents on waiting lists for elective surgery. Of these 4,061 have been waiting longer than the Charter limit”.

4.30 pm

The situation regarding delayed discharges and community care waiting lists is that

“both delayed patients and delay days at December end 2001 were 33% higher than at December 2000 ... 136 people were reported as waiting for care packages due to non-availability of funding in December”.

I could go on. All hospitals have reported bed availability problems as a result of delayed discharges. At the end of December 2001, community trusts reported that 136 elderly people were waiting for care packages, or for uplift to existing packages, due to no funding being available. Last year that figure was 126.

Dr Paisley spoke at length about concerns for animal health. That is justifiable. However, I emphasise the need for human health, and the need for the Assembly to deal with its resources in a more appropriate and effective manner that creates transparency and accountability and, more importantly, gives meaningful resolution to the problems that we face.

I referred to the need for external sources of funding. Again, I point to sources of funds within departmental budgets. Two or more years ago, the Executive talked about releasing funding because of the over-administration of Northern Ireland. Is there one less quango in Northern Ireland than there was when the Assembly was elected in 1998? The answer is “No.” We still have the skins of the onion — the 26 local authorities, the many trusts, the health boards and the education boards — the layer upon layer of administration that is costing the taxpayer money. Examine the Estimates. Without exception, Departments’ administrative costs are increasing. Those are the areas on which the

Assembly must concentrate in order to bring about some resolution. Unless that is done, the Assembly is kidding itself — and, more importantly, it is kidding the people that it is supposed to represent.

Ms Morrice: Like many other Members, I spent the weekend poring over these figures. They threw up more questions than answers. I want to ask those questions in detail today. However, I would like to begin by pointing out the features of the document that the Women's Coalition regards as positive in relation to the needs of Northern Ireland.

The party welcomes the additional money that is going towards disabled access to, for example, schools and universities. That is a valuable area of expenditure. We welcome new expenditure on issues such as energy efficiency in schools. I hope that that is being extended to hospitals, particularly in the light of the high fuel costs indicated in the Budget. We also welcome additional funds for access to treatment for rheumatoid arthritis. Finally, I want to welcome the additional support for youth, community and housing security measures in north Belfast. Those are features of the Supplementary Estimates that I believe are valuable and that underline that the Assembly is working for the people of Northern Ireland.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClelland] in the Chair)

I am afraid that it goes downhill from there. There are areas of general concern in the document. Mr Close described that well when he spoke of being "blinded by the science". Every Member has mentioned the highly complex procedure that they have been asked to comment on this afternoon — the monitoring, the Supplementary Estimates, the inclusion of Executive programme funds, and the new resource approach. All are highly complex. Every Member will echo my appeal to the Minister to adopt a much more user-friendly approach to reduce the complexity of those issues, and to make the process much more accessible and transparent, not only to ourselves but to members of the public. That is vital if we are to move forward in that area.

Given the figures, certain Departments appear to be getting their sums right, yet others appear to be getting their sums badly wrong. I would appreciate some explanation for that. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department of the Environment are two Departments that have not asked for any additional funding. I assume that they are to be congratulated on getting their sums right. If that is incorrect, I would appreciate an explanation. With new resource accounting, the Department for Regional Development must account for roads. I appreciate the Minister of Finance and Personnel's explanation of that in his opening statement. Health is obviously a crisis-led issue that I shall deal with later.

We assume that the Department of Finance and Personnel would surely get its sums right, as opposed to any other, as it is in the lead role in that area. However, that Department has asked for an additional £33 million because it did not get its sums right. I want that explained. That sum includes £19 million for pension payments and lump-sum benefits. The Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety also have sections on pensions and lump-sum benefits, but those Departments are not asking for additional money for those purposes. Am I to assume that civil servants are more in need of that additional money than teachers or nurses? I would appreciate an explanation of that, and of the Department of Finance and Personnel's mathematical skills in particular.

During Question Time, I asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel about the reduction, by many millions of pounds, of funding under Peace I, which the report mentions, and whether European moneys have been returned to Brussels as a result of underspend. In his opening statement, the Minister guaranteed that that money will not go back to Brussels. I would appreciate hearing that again and again.

I shall go into more detail and cover each Department as it appears in the report. First, I turn to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Dr Paisley highlighted the money that is to be spent on animal health, animal disease and compensation. I especially want to look at the £3.5 million compensation paid out for brucellosis cases. The Minister is surely aware that the Public Accounts Committee is looking into that. The Committee has certain serious concerns about the brucellosis compensation and how it works. I underline that concern.

I have not numbered the page to which I am about to refer, so I cannot quote the exact wording. However, I think that I am right in saying that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is looking for an additional £500,000 for what are called legal costs and consultancy fees for work on the introduction of the euro. That obviously fascinated me. Has that money already been spent? If so, how was it spent in advising the public about the introduction of the euro? Has the money yet to be spent? I would certainly welcome it if that were the case, but I want to know what will happen to that money when it becomes available.

Moving to page 82 of the document, there are some concerns about the Department for Employment and Learning. In particular — and I imagine that having come from that Department the Minister well knows the subject — point (xii) states that New Deal provision is being reduced by some £5 million. I would appreciate an explanation of that. Long-term unemployment is a serious issue here, so should the Department's strategic planning for tackling it not be better, with staff in

place who could understand and deal with the backlog of some 7,000 applicants?

With regard to Health, Social Services and Public Safety on page 94, my concern relates to a £10 million additional provision towards reducing the deficits of health and social services trusts. I understand that this is the first time such provision has been seen, and we voice our alarm at it. What is it? Does it involve GP fundholders or practices? An explanation would be appreciated.

Another concern is the £4.87 million increased provision

“to meet further Criminal Negligence settlements and to increase spending on the Northern Ireland Drugs Strategy;”

Why is that needed? I would appreciate further detail.

Page 142 deals with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. What struck me there was the decrease in provision by £105,000

“reflecting the transfer of resources for victims to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.”

Why is money being moved from the Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety? Does the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister no longer have a budget for victims? Has its responsibility for victims been removed? What exactly happens to that money? Why is £105,000 being transferred, when the Budget provision is £150,000? An explanation would be appreciated.

Finally, the Assembly itself is dealt with on page 152. In respect of increased provision, I should appreciate a breakdown of the request for £1.4 million in additional funding for

“capital charges and depreciation following the revaluation of existing assets and the purchase of additional assets.”

Some £90,000 of the £1.39 million is needed in cash, and I would appreciate a breakdown of Assembly expenditure in that area.

That completes my list of concerns. We went through the document with a fine toothcomb, and it was important to make those points.

To conclude, I agree with Mr Close that the knee-jerk, crisis-in-management approach to Budgets is inappropriate. Such adjustments and shifting about undoubtedly point to a greater need for a strategic approach to budgetary provision.

I repeat some figures that I used in the debate on the regional transport strategy last week. The 12,000 road traffic accidents, casualties and deaths per year in Northern Ireland cost the economy £450 million per year. Those figures must be mentioned on the Floor of the Assembly. I do not agree with Mr Close that money is scarce, but the lack of strategic provision is. Why do

we spend time on crisis management, picking people out of the river, when it would be better to put someone upstream to stop them jumping in in the first place?

4.45 pm

Mr McCartney: I rise entirely mindful that nothing that I might say, or indeed anything that anyone who appears to be vaguely critical of the proposals might say, will have the slightest effect. Come the vote, the marshalled ranks of the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP will ensure that the motions are carried.

We heard two interesting speeches from the previous two contributors. However, they were interesting in entirely different ways. Mr Close addressed some of the fundamental issues that relate to the governance of Northern Ireland; Ms Morrice gave a virtuoso performance in the art of financial and political nit-picking. Of course, one can go through their accounts and pick up this, that and the other thing, but the major issues must be addressed.

In financial and governance terms, Northern Ireland is a total mess. As a member of the electorate said to me recently, the Assembly appears to be a sort of theme park. It is a Disneyland, in which the political classes of Northern Ireland can play.

As far as the financial background of the governance of Northern Ireland is concerned, the fundamental mistake was made when those major parties involved in negotiating the Belfast Agreement failed to extract from the British Government a substantial contribution, amounting to billions of pounds, to address the shortfall in infrastructure that had occurred in the previous 10, 20 or, as has been suggested by some, 30 years. That shortfall was believed to be in the region of £9 billion.

One lot was so interested in getting a devolved Assembly in order to get its hands on the levers of power that it entirely ignored that shortfall. The other lot was so interested in getting what it believed to be the extracting of transitional institutions for a united Ireland that it did not address the problem either.

The result, and the major financial problem with which the Assembly must cope, is how, on a limited budget, it can maintain the day-to-day financial demands and requirements without ever having the capital to address the huge deficit in infrastructure that it will never be able to address by saving money out of the annual operational costs in the block grant.

Take, for example, some of the problems in the Health Service to which Mr Close referred. Members know about the dreadful state of the orthopaedic services, paediatric services and cardiac units in Northern Ireland. It is not simply a question of pumping money for additional running cost into those institutions. Many of them do not have the appropriate capital investment

in their infrastructure to deliver. I know of the recent case of a patient — not a National Health Service patient, but a BUPA patient. He was a senior figure in the accountancy world who had advised Governments; he was once the chairperson of a health trust. According to his cardiologist, he required cardiac surgery within seven days.

The earliest that the surgery could be performed in Northern Ireland, even if he were to pay for it, was in two and a half months' time. The surgery was supposed to be performed within seven days. The cardiac surgeon advised him that he might have had to wait two years if he were a National Health Service patient. The problem was the total absence of the infrastructure that would have enabled cardiac surgeons, if they were available, to carry out the operation.

Mr Close gave a litany of defaults in the orthopaedic service. Many of our major orthopaedic units have suspended all elective operations for hip replacements for the elderly and other remedial surgery. There is no money for those.

The motion gives an estimated figure of £574,419,000, which is based, presumably, on 45% of what will be required for the full year. The cost of administering Government through the Assembly and the 10 Departments over the coming year will probably be in the region of £1.2 billion. Upwards of 10% of the entire block grant will be spent on administration — on the additional cost of 10 Departments, which are not designated as such on the basis of any economic approach or on grounds of efficiency or effectiveness. There are 10 Departments because a cobbled-together political arrangement required 10 Departments. The money will be spent not only on the additional cost of those Departments but on the additional costs of the Departments' liaising with each other, and on the organisation of a traumatised and wrecked Civil Service, whose staff have oscillated from old Departments to new Departments. There is a whole range of additional costs. It costs approximately £1.2 billion to run this place.

Mr Close mentioned bureaucracy and increased government. None of the quangos, which we were promised would go when the tier of Government represented by the Assembly was established, have gone. All we have done is multiply the bureaucracy, the furnishings, the deep-pile plush carpets and reserved spaces, and create a bureaucracy that is stifling the governance of the Province.

In addition to the 26 councils and umpteen quangos, we have the biggest quango of all — here — a quango that is going to absorb in the region of £45 million in the coming year. Not only is this Assembly a quango by its very existence, the number of Members it contains cannot conceivably be justified on the basis of any rational comparison with any of the other devolved

institutions in the United Kingdom. It certainly cannot be justified when compared with Scotland, which has far greater powers and a wider range of tax-raising abilities than we have. The Scottish Parliament has 129 Members for 5.5 million people. In addition to our 26 local councils, we have 108 Members for 1.6 million people. Wales has 60 Members for 3 million people. So much of the misgovernment of Northern Ireland has emanated from basing decisions, not on what was best for the governance of Northern Ireland, but on what was the most suitable political playpen for the political classes and on how the greatest possible number could participate in it.

However, we must not just look to the Health Service — there is also Mr Empey's Department. Mr Empey is presiding over a financial empire that is in total decline. One need only read the brief for tomorrow's debate on job losses in East Antrim to see what that Department is doing. It is estimated that there will be 4,000 job losses in that area.

Did the Department of Agriculture, for example, do a great deal to rescue the pork industry? It certainly minimised the effects of foot-and-mouth disease, aided by the fact that we are separated from the mainland by 21 miles of water. However, as Dr Paisley pointed out, what has it done to help the agriculture industry?

This Province has perhaps the best grammar school system in the UK, with an enormous number of children from both communities in Northern Ireland going to our own distinguished universities and to some of the most distinguished universities on the mainland and abroad. That system is about to be butchered on the shrine of some form of misguided political correctness, some sort of equality issue that states that the world is equal. It will be butchered, not on the basis of equality of opportunity, which we would all endorse, but on the basis of reducing every opportunity to some form of equality pap that everyone can ingest.

When we examine the Assembly's function and what it was designed to do — namely, to provide good governance for all the people in Northern Ireland — and consider the money that has been provided and that is being used, not in relation to some aspiration to maintain the Union or any equal aspiration to create Irish unity, we find that it is failing miserably because the very basis of governance is directed to fulfilling the ambitions of the political class in this Disney theme park that passes for Government.

Ms Morrice: Earlier I pointed out some things that are valuable, such as provision of disabled access to schools, energy efficiency in schools, access to rheumatoid arthritis treatment, help for north Belfast and youth and community work. Does the Member agree that those good works show the value of what we are doing here?

Mr McCartney: All those issues, while important and valuable in themselves, are absolutely peripheral and marginal to the essential governance of Northern Ireland.

What are the main services that people in a modern society look to their Government to provide? Health, for one — the Health Service is a mess. That is acknowledged by everyone, whether Unionist, Nationalist or any other variety of politician. It is the worst mess in the United Kingdom. Our waiting lists are 50% longer than those in the rest of the UK, where waiting lists are already considered to be a disgrace.

We are on the verge of wrecking a perfectly good education system. I am not talking about the abolition of the 11-plus — I believe that that needs to be looked at.

I am not talking about preserving grammar schools just because that is where middle-class children are educated. I received such an education, and I was certainly not middle class, as were many others. Instead of fiddling about waging some sort of class war on education, whether we are in Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party, or any other party, we should be looking at how we can improve that part of our educational system that is not functioning as it should be, rather than taking a hatchet to that part which is good. That is not happening because political battles are being fought about other issues.

5.00 pm

Value for money is very much the order of the day. Is the public getting value for money from this Assembly? The Assembly was supposed to provide more accessible, more sensitive, more effective, more accountable Government — it is doing none of those things. All the major services that the people expect a Government to provide have got far worse instead of better under devolved Government. Now this is not necessarily an attack on devolved Government as an abstract philosophy; it is an attack upon devolved Government as practised in this Assembly, and based upon a system which is not democratic at all. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot allow conversations to develop.

Mr McCartney: For example, look at the cost of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for last year, which was £35.5 million, give or take a few thousand — only marginally less than the cost of running the entire Assembly. What does the office administer, and what does it do? Money is being wasted on maladministration here. I see an hon Member smiling. Perhaps he would not be smiling if he was one of the 136 elderly folk who cannot get a community care package because of maladministration. Bed blocking costs £1,500 to £2,000 a time, but if a fair sum was

paid to private nursing care, the cost could be a third of that price — but that is quango control.

The Assembly has done absolutely nothing to attack the cost of bureaucracy in administration and so reform its finances. We had a nicely delivered speech from the Minister of Finance and Personnel, but was it his speech, or was it the speech of the army of bureaucrats that are preparing everything? This is not devolved Government — this place is a bureaucrats' paradise. Nothing in that speech addressed the sort of problems that Mr Close mentioned. We need fundamental reform of the financial system and better use of the funds available to us. I am not an admirer of devolution — certainly not in the form of this Assembly. However, we have devolution, and I am a democrat. Regardless of party, we should look very carefully at how devolution, as practised in Northern Ireland, is serving the people. There is little in these Estimates to indicate that it is doing that efficiently.

Mr J Kelly: I hesitate to follow Bob McCartney, but much of what he said about how we are delivering, or trying to deliver and perhaps not succeeding, is correct. However, I want to take up his last point about a public administration review. In January 1999, we were told that this public review would be undertaken. Three years later there is not one quango fewer, not one trust fewer and not one board fewer.

No Department can plan anything until the matter of public administration has been resolved. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education cannot be blamed for all the ills. However, they do get the blame; and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in particular, is blamed for the waiting lists, the lack of orthopaedic surgery and the lack of cardiac surgery.

Mr McCartney: The Member will acknowledge that in my speech or my criticism I never mentioned the Minister once.

Mr J Kelly: I am not suggesting that the Member did. I am merely saying that until the review of public administration has been sorted out, every Department will be hampered in how it advances its particular agenda. That is all I was saying.

The Member is right when he says that we are overburdened in comparison to Scotland or Wales. However, we must take into account the special circumstances and the fact that this Assembly came into being to resolve a political question rather than an economic or a social one — although we are attempting to address those along the way.

At the core of this — and this was touched on — is the lack of collective responsibility and of a concerted approach at the centre to resolve pressing social,

economic, health, education and housing problems. The fact that a public administration review has been taking place since January 1999 without having advanced one iota indicates the lack of collective responsibility for resolving these matters.

Certainly, there may be difficulties with one party, which is prepared and happy to live off the largesse of the Good Friday Agreement without bearing the responsibilities that derive from the agreement, a party whose members put their fingers and thumbs into the political pie of the Good Friday Agreement and pull out the political plums without bearing their share of collective responsibility.

During the last big debate about health in this Chamber, it was said over and over again that health was being starved of money. Seamus Close said that Mark Durkan acknowledged that health was the priority in the Programme for Government when he introduced his Budget. Yet health still remains to be prioritised for funding. During the Budget debate Mark Durkan said that what he was giving to health would allow the health programme merely not to stand still. Bob McCartney and other Members have made it clear that it must do more than not stand still. If we care, if our function is to meet the social needs of the people whom we are elected to serve, health must be at the very centre of how we deliver our responsibilities. If the Executive cannot get their act together on their collective responsibility to health, then how can they get their act together in dealing with other responsibilities?

The Northern Ireland Confederation for Health and Social Services (NICON), which is at the core of the Health Service, has already indicated that the Health Service requires an extra £100 million a year, or £1 billion over 10 years. That sum is necessary to allow the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to plan a strategy that can deliver at the point of need and that can address the serious shortcomings in all the disciplines in the medical services, such as orthopaedics, cardiac surgery and cancer in all its manifestations. The Health Service is badly behind in its infrastructure and is unable to address long waiting lists and delays in dealing with cancer. We have had and continue to have —

Mr McGrady: The Member raises an interesting point that I referred to earlier. He said that the Ministers in the Executive must get their act together. I presume that he means that they have not yet got their act together. Secondly, is it not the case that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, as other Ministers, agreed with the Minister of Finance and Personnel the budget for her Department? Does the Member confirm that? In other words, each Minister takes responsibility for what he or she has already agreed.

Mr J Kelly: Yes, but in attempting to address the Health Service, not in the short term or on a day-to-day basis —

Mr McGrady: Long term.

Mr J Kelly: Yes, the long-term aspect has not been addressed. As a priority in the Programme for Government, the Executive undertook to address the long-term ability to deal with the shortcomings in the Health Service. If any Minister goes to the Executive to plead for their particular area of responsibility, they will get only what they ask for. There needs to be a commitment at the centre of Government, not just one Department, to this area that affects everyone; it affects the social, economic and health well-being of the community. There should be a collective responsibility in addressing that issue and the obvious shortcomings in that particular Department. That has not been done.

In their Programme for Government, the Executive have failed to prioritise health and in the collective responsibility to address health. It is clear to most people that that has not been addressed. If it had been seriously addressed, then we would not have the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ and all health disciplines continually complaining about a lack of funding. The sad fact is that the people at the coalface, those who are most anxious to see an end to waiting lists in whatever discipline, are those who are suffering the most.

5.15 pm

It is not good enough to suggest that a budget that is brought before the Executive satisfies a particular Minister. It is not the responsibility of one Minister. The Executive are responsible for addressing health issues and the way in which they are failing the Health Service. I will not make a plea on behalf of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Everyone is aware of the state of health provision in our community.

There is no point in tying the hands of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and then sniping from the sidelines. Health is a priority, so let us get the funding right. Let us get on with the review of public administration that we have been waiting for, and let us allow the Health Minister to get on with her job.

Mr Savage: I have listened carefully to Members’ comments. Some interesting statistics were quoted.

As a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I have heard how much money is needed to deal with brucellosis, tuberculosis and other diseases — the figures are shocking. What could we do with that money if we had it today? Veterinary scientists who know as much about the matter as some of our departmental specialists have asked me whether the vaccination of all farm animals has been considered. All two- or three-day-old cattle must be vaccinated against various diseases. The need to vaccinate animals becomes clearer every day, but insufficient thought has been given to the matter. The millions of pounds that

are spent at the moment are a drain of resources from the country. That money could be put to better use.

Mr McGrady: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is the Assembly quorate?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Mr Savage: I listened to the questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety today, and I asked her an important question. I also attended an event at the Long Gallery today during which cancer and the work of Macmillan Cancer Relief were discussed. I do not want to compare the two discussions. The number of doctors per capita in Northern Ireland by comparison to the equivalent figures for other countries does not bear thinking about. It almost seems as if people here do not care.

An environmental point that was not made is that if nothing is done about the pollution of this country we will gradually poison ourselves. It used to be possible to use water from a well, but that is no longer the case, because everything is at risk of pollution.

I hope that the Departments get their act together. As a member of the Agriculture Committee, I would have liked to have had the opportunity to propose how much money is needed for specific purposes. Although I do not miss many meetings, I did not have the opportunity to make my case. In December 2000 we put forward a case for an early retirement scheme and long-term low-interest loans for the agriculture sector. Not enough serious thought has been put into those issues. However, bearing in mind what is happening in various sectors, a time will come when the people who come after us will say that we had our opportunity and did not take it.

Mr Close and Ms Morrice talked about the number of accidents on our roads. What have we been doing to counteract that? What cost do you put on a life? People have talked about how much it costs to run the Assembly. What is the cost of saving one life, five lives, or ten lives? It is bound to bear fruit eventually. There are many things that the Assembly could be taking a greater interest in.

Look at the size of the budget we have to discuss — and see how few Members are sitting in the House today. Those who are not here should be ashamed of themselves. I do not know where they are. Ministers — with their big Departments — should be here today to fight their corner. They should show more interest. They need not leave it to the Back-Benchers to do it for them. That will not happen. I will not take the blame for people who should be making more of an effort to debate the matters that come before us.

We have talked about the many issues that face this country at present. Mr John Kelly pointed to the three main questions — health, standards of living and food

protection. We can do something about those matters. With all due respect to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and her Department, it would not matter who held that post. The Minister and the Department must address the crisis. There is a large backlog — and we have had a mild winter. I dread to think what might have happened in our hospitals had the winter been a rough one.

One of the big hospitals — Craigavon Area Hospital — is in my constituency. Problems are emerging there week in, week out. If that hospital had the facilities and the nursing manpower, it could do something about the existing problems. The nurses there are heavily overworked, and the hospital does not have the facilities to cope with the number of patients coming through its doors. More money should be put into recruiting young doctors, because there is a scarcity of them. Doctors will not come into the Health Service unless they are going to be able to provide proper care and attention. When you consider the challenges they face and the hours they have to work you cannot blame them for not going down the Health Service route. Dr Adamson, who is sitting behind me, is a very experienced doctor, and I am sure he will bear out what I am saying.

I wish that Ministers would take Committees more into their confidence and allow them to have a greater input into determining budgets. We must be realistic: if we are not, then the work of the last three or four years will have been in vain.

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Dallat): There are some technical matters that I would like to address, the first of which relates to the Northern Ireland Audit Office spring Supplementary Estimates for 2001-02. The Audit Committee has statutory responsibility for agreeing and presenting the Audit Office Estimate, and as Chairperson, I am speaking in support of its bid for a Supplementary Estimate of £49,000. That amount was included in its original submission to the Audit Committee for its 2001-02 funding. However, for technical reasons, it was not possible for the money to be included in the Main Estimates, and it was agreed with the Department of Finance and Personnel that it should be provided by a Supplementary Estimate. The Audit Committee has agreed the amount requested in the Supplementary Estimate, and I commend it for the approval of the Assembly.

The second matter concerns the Northern Ireland Audit Office Vote on Account for 2002-03. The amounts requested for the Vote on Account are £2,096,000 in cash and £2,320,000 in resources. The Audit Committee will soon meet with the Comptroller and Auditor General to discuss his office's spending plans for 2002-03. In the meantime, I am satisfied that the amounts have been calculated using the standard formulae, and I commend them to the Assembly for approval.

Now that that formality is out of the way, I wish to remove my Chairperson's hat and speak as a Member of the Assembly — *[Interruption]*.

Mr S Wilson: and make yourself more money.

Mr Dallat: I am just regulating the technicalities. The budget of approximately £4.5 million is a huge sum of money that must be spent in the way in which it was intended. There must be no flaws in the procurement procedures, and it must be clearly shown that the public gets excellent value for money. The task of verifying that money is properly spent falls to the Northern Ireland Audit Office under the control of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

I want to place on record my total confidence in the Audit Office and its staff. The reports that the office has produced have enabled the Public Accounts Committee to scrutinise public spending in a way that was not possible under direct rule. The Public Accounts Committee has tackled its job without fear or favour, and it deserves the support of the entire Assembly. I am sorry that it does not always receive that support. The reports are, without exception, balanced and fair. I have left it to others to express concerns about health, education, agriculture and other issues that have been discussed.

I want to use my limited time to highlight the absolute need to ensure that all Government Departments and non-departmental Government bodies play their part in rebuilding this economy that has been so damaged under direct rule. During that time bad practices crept in, accountability was less than acceptable, and on some occasions a degree of arrogance evolved when money and, indeed, people were being dealt with. Reports prepared by the Audit Office are agreed and signed off by the accounting officer responsible for the Department to which the report relates. There is a genuine wish that reports are not delayed before they are signed off. It is fundamental that the reports are published quickly, so that the Public Accounts Committee has the opportunity to scrutinise them with the Comptroller and Auditor General before arranging a public hearing at which the relevant Department's accounting officer has an opportunity to answer questions. That is fundamental to change for the better.

I believe that I have the full support of the Assembly when I say that Members will take it seriously if they discover that reports are held up unnecessarily. If that were to become widespread, it would cause enormous damage to the work of the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee. The problem is not widespread by any means, but there is concern that a report relating to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has not been signed off in order that it could be published this week. As I have said, that concerns me and, no doubt, others.

The Minister recently undertook to ensure, as far as is practical, that reports are not unduly held up. I draw

that fact to the Assembly's attention in the belief that the current delay will be brief.

5.30 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): As Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, I note the Department of the Environment's overall planned expenditure rise of 10% to £110.9 million for 2002-03.

Members of the House will recall that my Committee successfully fought to restore the proposed £2 million that was cut from the local resources grant. The cut would have applied to the 16 poorest councils. That would have been a major injustice that would have directly contradicted the Executive's targeting social need policy. It is interesting to note that the proposal to cut district council resources arose because of inescapable new pressures — some £2 million — on EU international obligations. My Committee examined the nature of those new pressures and fully supported the priority that the Department attached to them. For example, there was pressure applied to advance long overdue action on waste management. I shall return to that subject later.

I shall explain to the House what my Committee did to scrutinise the Department of the Environment's budget proposals for 2002-03. We obtained the full breakdown of the Department's discretionary expenditure of £14.6 million, having set aside inescapable expenditure such as salaries, EU obligations, local government derating and the resources grant. We questioned senior officials to justify that expenditure, having categorised it by priority — high, medium and low — and to explain the consequences of not meeting each item of expenditure. We scrutinised the Department's potential asset sales, the scope to increase the use of receipts to fund baseline expenditure and the potential to fast-track EU compliance expenditure for 2002-03 to utilise moneys being surrendered in this financial year.

I noticed that some Members in the House feel that their Committees have not been able to get enough information from Ministers or from Departments. If they accept such a situation, that says more about them than about the Departments, as I assure the House that when my Committee desires to have information, we are not put off easily.

The Committee concluded that there was little scope or flexibility in the Department's budget to make savings or switch resources. It is essential to protect the sizeable budget element, to implement EU obligations, and to maintain and build on much needed services, such as planning services, where there is a clear increase in demand. In the light of the Committee's conclusion, and the reality of emerging EU international obligation budget pressures, I ask the new Minister of Finance and Personnel, along with his Colleague the Minister of the Environment, to consider ring-fencing the

provision for local government services and the EU international obligation provision within the Department of the Environment's budget.

District councils are at the forefront of many important initiatives under way to protect our environment that link directly to EU Directives. For example, waste management plans and the local air quality schemes are important issues. Therefore, to ring-fence the local government budget would provide the financial stability to allow councils to implement quickly that essential work, which would benefit all the people of Northern Ireland. My Committee has taken a particular interest in recent months in getting the three regional waste management plans funded and operational.

We questioned representatives from the three groups and also departmental officials on two separate occasions in an endeavour to find ways to hasten their work and to help them to meet their EU obligations. Members of the Committee welcomed the long-awaited launch of the plans last week, and I assure the House that my Committee will continue its monitoring and will do whatever is necessary to ensure that those plans are delivered quickly.

The Committee was alarmed to learn that £1 million of the Department's budget for waste management was surrendered in October 2001. Having pressed the Department of the Environment and the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Committee has received written assurances that any shortfall in the waste management budget for 2002-03 will be favourably treated in in-year bids, bearing in mind that the work is essential to meet EU obligations. The Committee was reminded of the importance of that work last week, when it was advised that failure to meet the EU Directive on waste management could incur United Kingdom fines of £400,000 a day at the end of the year. The Northern Ireland Executive Budget would contribute directly to such fines if Northern Ireland failed to implement the Directive.

The Committee recognises the strong case for increasing expenditure in some other Departments but makes the point that a sizeable increase in the £111 million allocated to the Department of the Environment's baseline would be marginal in the Northern Ireland block of over £6 billion. That increase would, however, have a significant impact on the protection of the environment — a Cinderella during direct rule. The Assembly should consider allocating proper funding to secure and sustain Northern Ireland's primary asset before it is too late.

I shall remove the hat of the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment and speak on other issues.

Mr John Kelly stated that we were overburdened and that additional resources were necessary and quick

action was needed on the public administration review. Coming from Sinn Féin those are interesting remarks. It was to please Sinn Féin party sponsors that the Assembly was overburdened, in relation to the size of Northern Ireland, with 108 elected Members. It was to placate Sinn Féin's greed that 10 Departments were formed instead of six. That was to allow Sinn Féin to get its greedy hands on two ministries. It was also to placate the idealism of so-called Sinn Féin that over £50 million is being spent on cross-border bodies. All of this was at the insistence of Sinn Féin and its fellow travellers. It is rather rich, to say the least, for Sinn Féin to lecture the Assembly about the need for allocating money to Departments for which it has responsibility.

There is no doubt that people's health is a priority, and the House has recognised that in allocating resources in the past, and I trust that it will do so in the future. I have said it before, and I shall say it again — it is not simply the allocation of resources that makes an effective Department. One of the major catastrophes of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is not just lack of funding in the past but that the Department is without leadership. The ship is rudderless because the Minister is totally ineffective, without vision or effort.

We have a crisis in the Health Service. Mr Close mentioned the British Medical Association. Much of the Department's work has been dictated by various Royal College instructions and diktats, rather than by a consideration of the whole picture and the needs of acute services throughout the community.

For example, the elderly feel forsaken. We had several debates on that issue in the Chamber. We allocated money for nursing care for the elderly in nursing homes. However, we have been told that the elderly will continue to be drained of their savings until October. It will be another eight to ten months before the will of the Assembly will be implemented.

It was the Assembly's will that the Department should take the responsibility for nursing costs. The Department will not take that responsibility immediately. The Minister tells us that the elderly will have to wait until October. They will have to pay for their own care, and their resources will be drained away while the Assembly's resolution that the elderly should be relieved of that financial burden is set aside until October.

I have heard the fanciful statements about who is to blame. New Labour blames the Conservatives for everything. Certainly, there are problems for which the Conservatives must carry the blame. However, we have had direct rule under the Conservatives and under Labour. The lack of resources is the responsibility of the Labour Government as well as of the former Conservative Government.

Recently the 'Belfast Telegraph' published an article showing that six years ago, under direct Conservative rule, there were 22,000 nurses in Northern Ireland. However, under the Assembly and the Minister there are 16,000 nurses. Surely there is something wrong. It cannot be blamed on the then Conservative Government, because the figure of 22,000 refers to the period when the Conservatives left office. The lower figure refers to the period under the new Labour Administration and then the Assembly. If the figures are correct — and they have been in the public arena — the Department of Health ought to hang its head in shame.

This is why our nurses are overworked and why many of them are at the end of their personal resources and suffering health breakdowns. That decline did not happen under the Conservative Government, behind which the Minister seems to hide, but under her stewardship. The bottom line is that the Minister is not capable of doing the job.

If we want more resources, we should look at the 10 Departments, the constant stream of finance that goes to the cross-border bodies, and the number of elected representatives in this Chamber. There are quangos and a public administration review that does not seem to get off the ground. Many people heralded that the Assembly would grasp the quangos and the public administration by the neck and arrest the decline in our public services.

That has not been the reality. We have gone in the opposite direction. The stream of finance to the quangos flows on; money flows into more quangos and cross-border bodies, which are not answerable to this Chamber of elected representatives.

The increase in finances being pumped into the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister must be examined. Resources must be scrutinised carefully in order to determine the purpose for which they are being used.

5.45 pm

Let us consider the roads. I appreciate that the Minister is right in relation to finances for particular schemes. However, the Minister cannot evade his responsibility in relation to the infrastructure. Unless money is allocated to the Department for Regional Development, the need to enhance the infrastructure throughout the Province cannot become a reality. Members agree that transport — roads and rail — has in the past been a disaster with regard to finances. Transport was put on the back-burner, as were many other things. However, that is no excuse for the Assembly not providing for, or meeting, the challenge.

I mentioned the Magherafelt bypass. The bypass would not only enhance the economic future of my own district of Magherafelt but also that of Cookstown,

which is where all traffic must go in order to reach the seaports and airports. The constant blockages and the time wasted sitting in traffic in Magherafelt are detrimental to the economic development of the Cookstown district as well as Magherafelt. Adequate finances must be made available, and that is the responsibility of the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Farming has been mentioned already. I reiterate the demand for a retirement scheme that will allow farmers to retire with dignity. Many of the problems facing that industry, more so than any other, have not come about as a result of the irresponsibility or neglect of the farming community in Northern Ireland, which has produced primary goods and given us its best. Many of the challenges that have arisen, such as BSE and other problems in the pig and sheep sectors, have been out of the control of farmers. Farmers looked to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for guidance. They were given guidance, to which they adhered. Unfortunately, farmers paid the price for listening to that advice.

A retirement scheme would allow farmers to retire with dignity and honour. However, there must be a young entrants scheme so that the young people of the Province's rural community can see a future and a vision for farming. If Northern Ireland's farmers do not provide food, farmers in some other part of the EU will do so instead. Why should our farmers have their backs to the wall because of negativity in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and in the Administration?

Farmers are being assisted elsewhere. When Northern Ireland's pig farmers had their backs to the wall, the Department was unwilling to help them. We were told that EU regulations would not allow that. France is in the EU, and it was one of the guiding fathers of those regulations, yet the French Government were able to help their farmers. The French Government provided resources for their farmers and bailed them out when their backs were against the wall. Ministers told me that EU rules could not be broken. Of course, France and the Irish Republic can break the rules, but Northern Ireland cannot. In the end, those farmers who were supported by their Government managed to stay in the field.

They continued and, in actual fact, their financial position has been enhanced. It is sad to say that our Government let many farmers go to the wall. It is also sad to say that many of the banks and finance houses in this country that goaded the farmers into debt turned on them when their backs were against the wall and looked for their pound of flesh, rather than assisting them.

I want to speak on a subject as an elected representative for my constituency. It is very difficult to get through even as many as eight questions in Question Time, especially questions on health. A person speaks in

gibberish and then in English, and that is given as an excuse for not answering questions. Fewer questions are answered because it takes double the time.

The Minister of Education, in reply to a question, talked much today about our children being equal. I invite any Member of the Assembly to visit schools in Magherafelt and see if our children are equal. There is a primary school and a secondary school in Magherafelt in the state, or controlled, sector that are in deplorable conditions. In the maintained sector, millions of pounds have been spent in St Mary's. Millions of pounds have also been spent, and are currently being spent, in St Pius's. In the person's own constituency, however, Magherafelt High School is in a deplorable condition.

Children are not equal. Protestant children in that constituency are being discriminated against. We are compiling the figures, because they will speak for themselves. When equality of treatment for all schoolchildren is paraded as a supposed ideal, I, as a public representative, must ensure that equality of treatment for all schoolchildren — in the controlled, maintained and independent sectors — will be a reality and that discrimination against the state or controlled sector will be brought to an end.

All is not well in education — far from it. Even in this debate I trust that, as an elected representative, I have the opportunity of blowing the trumpet with a very certain sound to ensure that we have action rather than pious words.

Ms Lewsley: We know, as the wider public knows, that the resources from the Treasury are not sufficient to meet the needs of this society. One of the few ways of raising funds for health, education, roads and all other services that have been mentioned today that are needed by people in our constituencies is through the rates. Although no one in the House likes to raise the issue of rates, realistically we must depend on rates to raise much needed revenue. It is, of course, essential to develop innovative means of funding and efficiency so that we can reduce our dependence upon rates.

I welcome the Minister's statement. I am very aware of the pressures faced by the Executive in meeting demands with limited resources. As a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I am heartened by the statement. It is clear that the new Minister is as committed to making those funds go a long way as his predecessor was. It is important that we support and approve the actions of the Minister of Finance and Personnel. His job is a difficult and complex one, and he is doing it fairly and professionally. However, it is insufficient just to offer congratulations from these Benches.

All Members, and particularly those in the Executive and the Committees, must work ceaselessly in pursuit of the goals of everyone in our community. We must

be watchful of expenditures that do not meet existing priorities. We must continually question the use of resources in every Department and ask if such use represents value for money. The pressures on the Health Service have been discussed today and have been recognised by the Minister and the Executive. In the 2001 Budget, the whole allocation of £27.8 million for Northern Ireland announced in the pre-Budget statement went on health, together with an immediate cash injection of £8 million for this year. In total the amount allocated to health for the next year represents an increase of 9.7% on the current year's provision. That must be welcomed.

It has been said before that the Health Service needs resources, but the House must be assured that funds are being spent as efficiently and effectively as possible. I, therefore, welcome the needs and effectiveness evaluations that have been undertaken in several Departments. Will the Minister tell us when those reviews will be completed?

The Minister said that the reviews of the Executive programme funds were under way. I agree with the concept of those funds; they are a sign that the new Administration is committed to using the funds in an innovative way that truly supports cross-departmental actions. In reviewing the Executive programme funds, I ask the Minister to ensure that the concept remains intact. What is the timetable for the completion of that review?

I appreciate that the Barnett formula can be misunderstood. It is not simply a case of seeking a review of the formula, with the subsequent assumption that we will receive a larger share of the block grant. Members should take into account the risk involved in pressing for a re-examination of the Barnett formula — it could end up with a negative result. I ask the Minister to address the issue in his summing-up and to outline how the Executive intend to take it forward.

I welcome the changes brought about by the monitoring process and budgets, which we decided for ourselves. Local decision-making is beginning to take effect, and we can set our own priorities. Again, everyone should welcome that.

I share some of the frustrations expressed about the process and timing of the Supplementary Estimates. The issues are difficult, and Members want to understand them fully and contribute to the process. Perhaps the Minister will consider providing a summary of the decisions or take steps to assist us in fully buying into the budgetary process.

I support the Supply resolution, and ask the House to do the same, and more, to build a resource base for the future.

Mr S Wilson: At this point much of what had to be said about the general issues surrounding the allocation of resources has been said. I do not want to make a plea for special cases in areas in which I am particularly interested or which would benefit the constituency and the groupings that I represent. That plea ought to be made, but I will look first at the general concept of the debate.

Many Members spoke about the opportunity to scrutinise. Ms Lewsley said that we must work ceaselessly and be watchful of expenditure that does not meet priorities. Mr Savage wanted a bigger input into determining the Budget. I listened to special cases for health, for cutting waiting lists, for dealing with the environment, farming issues and all the other areas of disadvantage. I find it difficult to believe that Members want to have a bigger input into the Budget but also want to examine matters that should not be priorities. What priorities do they have in their minds?

6.00 pm

How enslaved are they to their party Whips?

Is it a bigger priority to spend over £50 million on the political correctness of cross-border bodies than it is to spend the money on hospitals so that people who are hobbling about in pain can have hip replacements? Is it a bigger priority to give the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister a budget equivalent to that required to run the Assembly? The Programme for Government states that its budget should be used to

“assist the Executive in making and implementing well-informed and timely policy decisions and improving public services”.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is allocated almost £16 million to do that. Is that really a priority? Are those things a priority in the minds of Members? Those are just a few examples.

Dr Birnie: I am sure that the Member will remember from his previous professional expertise that there is a strong argument that the significant demand for healthcare is practically infinite in the United Kingdom because it is provided free at the point of use. Can he help the House by outlining how many extra millions are necessary for healthcare? All the £50 million from the North/South bodies could be put into the health system, only to find that it makes little difference.

Mr S Wilson: I am glad that the Member raised that point, because I intend to speak about resources. We could, perhaps, pump another £50 million into the Health Service and find that it is still not enough. However, even if that were the case, I should prefer to see that money put into services that affect the lives of constituents than see it go to politically correct institutions that are in place only to satisfy the demands of Sinn Féin and the SDLP.

The question of whether the Assembly has made the Administration accountable has not been asked. Either that or Members really do have a skewed sense of what is important. My Colleague Dr McCrea reminded us that we were told that there would be an assault on quangos. Quangos, to use his words, would be “grasped by the neck”. They have been grasped by the neck — they have been hugged.

The two main parties in the Assembly have definitely hugged them. They could not wait to set quangos up and put some of their prime members on them. They did not want to do away with quangos; they wanted to institute more of them.

Has the Assembly addressed the way in which the costs of administration have burgeoned? It has not.

One of the reasons for that is that the Assembly’s pro-agreement parties have put in place layers of administration to suit their own political demands. Some are too afraid to upset the others and are therefore whipped into backing certain views. Their words in the House show that they are not happy that money should be spent in such a way. However, their votes in the Lobbies belie their words, because they vote for the very things that they say they oppose. This should be a significant debate — it should be a debate about priorities and resources. At the end of the debate, Members should vote according to how they have spoken. That will not happen, because they will find someone else to blame. Mr John Kelly epitomises that approach.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has received a big increase in resources, as Dr Birnie mentioned. Nevertheless, we are told that there is still a crisis. They used to be able to blame the Brits. There are still Members who blame direct rule, even though direct rule ended four years ago, just as the Labour Party still blames the Conservatives. Mr John Kelly has refined that approach; he no longer blames the Minister responsible, but the Executive. Someone else is always to blame. He should consider how the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has used resources. She seems more interested in employing linguists to do her interpretations than she is in employing doctors and nurses to do what patients need; yet we still hear criticism and people crying and moaning that they need more resources.

Certain areas must be addressed. I shall not say a great deal about this matter — I said that I would not make pleas for special cases. However, we must consider housing provision. I say that because I am on the Social Development Committee and have a special interest in that matter. It is wrong to think that we can rejuvenate run-down areas of Northern Ireland if we do not put money into urban regeneration, including housing. It is fair to ask for additional resources. I have not been pleading many special cases. On occasions, I have made pleas

for more money for the roads network or for schools — I recently tabled a motion on the need for additional capital for school buildings. However, it is not enough continually to hold out our hands to the Exchequer and say that the Barnett formula must be improved or changed. I would dread the Exchequer's doing that.

Mr O'Connor: The Member says that it is not enough simply to hold our hands out to the Exchequer, and he spoke about people saying one thing in the Chamber and voting for another in the Lobbies. Does he recall that when an attempt was made to raise additional capital by raising the regional rate he and his Colleagues walked through the "Noes" Lobby?

Mr S Wilson: It is not enough to dip our hands into the pockets of people who struggle from day to day to pay their bills and to keep their businesses going. It is not enough to pick money out of the wallets of people who are living just above the threshold of benefit support and say that we expect them to pay the bill for our folly. I have already outlined in the Assembly ways in which we could change the spending priorities that would not require us to put small businesses and vulnerable people on low or medium incomes in greater difficulty. The Member should not say that I simply walked through the "Noes" Lobby and left the problem to the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

We have suggested ways. Of course, the easy way out is to simply go along with the present pattern of expenditure and say, "Let the poor ratepayer pay for it". However, that is not an answer, and, at the end of the day, that will cause great difficulty.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Does my hon Friend agree that it would be more honourable to tell people that they are being taxed? The SDLP suggested another form of taxation, but that was to be introduced through the back door and not in an honourable way. It is far better to be honourable and tell people that you are taxing them — then at least they will know whether to support you.

Mr S Wilson: Thank you for that useful intervention.

I now turn to some of the points that Dr Birnie made. We must look for innovative ways of obtaining the additional resources needed to deliver public services. Perhaps the Assembly should be a little more innovative and should examine how current ways of delivering services could be changed to bring in additional finance.

There has been recent discussion about raising money through bonds to bring in additional revenue to deal with some of the capital and service requirements in Northern Ireland. That also requires a radical examination of how those services are delivered and whether they are delivered solely through the public sector. I have no problem with that. I believe that many people in Northern Ireland do not care whether their services are directed solely by a public body or whether they are

delivered by a body at arm's length from the public sector, which is run on a non-profit-making basis and which can draw down extra resources, provided — and this is the important thing — that they get a decent service. People are interested in the outcome; not where the input comes from. There is a range of services that we could deal with in that way.

I have heard opposition in the Assembly to PFI because it puts money in the hands of private contractors. I have no great difficulty with PFI schemes and, indeed, if more capital projects can be delivered in that way, I am quite happy to consider it.

The Assembly must look beyond dipping its hands into the pockets of the taxpayers, many of whom cannot afford it, and holding out a begging bowl to Westminster. If it can be proved through needs assessment that we are entitled to more money then we should be arguing the case. However, we cannot always rely on saying "We deserve this", whether justified or not.

The fundamental issues of the Assembly have been addressed in the debate: whether the Assembly has a mechanism which holds the Executive accountable; whether Members are so constrained by their party Whips that they do not vote in the way that they speak, and whether we are prepared to address the radical issue of how we obtain additional resources beyond the two main ways that we addressed the issue in the past, in order to deliver some of the services that are much needed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Minister to respond, I would like to make an observation that I have made at other times in the House — that it is unfortunate that Members who have asked questions of the Minister do not have the courtesy to remain when he responds.

Dr Farren: I have listened with great interest to the points that have been raised by Members, and I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

The debate has been used to make general and particular points relevant to the Budget. Many Members have used it for wider purposes, rehearsing well-worn arguments on the nature of our political institutions and their origin — but that is the nature of such debates. In my response, I shall attempt to focus on those matters that directly pertain to issues raised in my introductory remarks.

6.15 pm

Today's debate provides a further valuable opportunity to hear and consider Members' concerns about our spending plans. This is only the second occasion on which we have presented Supplementary Estimates to the Assembly. In many areas, our budgetary process is in the early stages of development and is still evolving. Undoubtedly, it will evolve taking note of the recommendations and points made by Members in their contributions. I am no guardian of the kind of status quo that some

allege we have, and I share with Members the desire and the conviction that ran through many of the contributions — ensuring that the Government are efficient and effective in meeting the needs of all our people.

The spring Supplementary Estimates draw together the spending decisions made by the Executive during the year. Some Members seem to be approaching these Supply resolutions as if they were being presented for their consideration for the very first time. Of course, that is not the case. We have been through these issues in statements on the monitoring rounds and in the considerable period allocated to the consideration of the Budget before it was adopted before Christmas. That period allowed all Members, both in Plenary and in Committee, considerable scrutiny and consideration of the priorities in today's Supply resolutions. I remind Members that these same issues have been before them for consideration in much the same terms as they are being presented today. Members should not speak as if this were the first time.

Several points and questions were raised during the debate, and I shall cover as many as I can now. Other, more detailed, questions, such as those posed by Ms Morrice, will require a more considered response later. Mr Molloy, Mr Close and others again raised concerns that people have not had enough time to consider the Supplementary Estimates; I have already dealt with that. I want to reaffirm what Mr Close said: we continue to look for improvements in scrutinising the spending allocations and the Estimates. I want to address the point fairly and frankly. There will never be much more time for Committee and Assembly scrutiny at this stage of the cycle, which falls tightly between decisions on December monitoring and the need for completing the approved process before the end of the year.

However, I reiterate that there is much more time to examine the issues, at several stages. First, the most important stage in each cycle is the autumn, when the Assembly can consider the issues that arise between the draft Budget and the revised Budget. Secondly, there is a considerable period between now and the debate on the Main Estimates in June. The motion covers an amount on account for 2002-03; the Main Estimates will simply complete that process in more detail.

Committees can, and should, take up issues relating to the Estimates for 2002-03 between now and the debates about them in June. There is a considerable amount of time left, therefore I do not accept the complaint of some Members that there is not always sufficient time to scrutinise the matters fully. I recognise that the timescale in this part of the cycle is tight, but we are revisiting issues in respect of which there has been much opportunity for debate and scrutiny.

Finally, and most importantly, we are about to begin an important spending review. In looking to the future,

Committees and the Assembly can now begin to scrutinise and analyse spending plans for 2003-04. Seamus Close pointed out that the Estimates were prepared on a resource basis, as were the Main Estimates last June, and cover allocations previously announced after the June, September and December monitoring rounds, all of which were the subject of detailed statements to the Assembly. The Estimates also cover the second round of allocations from the Executive programme funds, which were the subject of a statement to the House on 3 December.

Information on all the significant issues that were addressed today has been available to the Committees. The Committees could have pursued any matter with their Departments through the available channels on the basis of information that was provided in the context of earlier monitoring decisions and Budget proposals.

I was impressed by the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment's point that that Committee had set about prioritising and, in consultation with the Department, addressing the priorities that had been set by the Department and itself. He said that there should be no reason why other Committees might not adopt a similar approach and that it should not be difficult to obtain the level of access to departmental officials that the Environment Committee had to its Department. I believe that it is. Therefore, we should examine carefully how Committees contribute to the prioritisation and scrutiny process, both in retrospect and in prospect.

I have a great deal of sympathy with many of the views that were expressed, particularly the need to allow more time for consideration of the issues and to provide more user-friendly documentation. We will re-examine the issue and consider what improvements we could make. I will continue to take on board the Finance and Personnel Committee's views in that regard. I trust that the Committee will acknowledge that in my short period in office I have lost no time in making myself available to it when my presence was requested. I have also made myself available to the Committee Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson.

I again emphasise that Committees are free to ask questions at any stage of the processes that are now being concluded in these Estimates. That applies equally to discussions about the annual Budget and each monitoring round. Committee members do not need a signal from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that they may begin their scrutiny.

Several members have reasonably pointed out the sheer complexity and comparison of the material in front of us. I share the sense that there are more questions than answers, and that answers are sometimes hard to find. The details in the Estimates are necessary to fulfil the legislative obligations on Departments and on the Department of Finance and Personnel, which mirrors

practice elsewhere. I wonder what Members' reactions would be if we were to provide less information. I imagine that the point would rightly be made that we were concealing details that Members were entitled to have access to as regards how we spend the finances available to us. So, regrettably there is a degree of detail and complexity in the documentation before us. That follows a requirement that I — and I would like to think that many, if not all, Members of the Assembly — would want to see upheld. We should be fully accountable; and we should provide all of the detail necessary to be accountable to the House for all of the expenditure that is undertaken in its name.

There is still a case of a fundamental review of our processes, but we must confirm this in terms of resources and capital — as now required under resource budgeting — and deal with the varied responsibilities of different organisations in Departments, non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), North/South bodies, et cetera, all of which affect the complexity of the material in front of us. I have no difficulty with the proposition that we should continually review and update our processes in all of these regards.

Francie Molloy and Seamus Close expressed concerns about the amounts of funding that have regularly become available for in-year allocation. It is clearly an important principle that money not required for the purpose for which it was originally allocated should be made available for reallocation by the Executive and the Assembly. The nature of the in-year monitoring process also means that it is important that Departments identify easements as early as possible in the year, so that the funding can be deployed elsewhere. Monitoring rounds are therefore designed to deal with short-term, emerging spending pressures and easements. They are not a proper means of addressing longer-term, strategic spending priorities, and successful in-year bids do not imply that the additional resources will be available in subsequent years.

However, I imagine that, just as in the spending plans of almost any institution, if we were not in a position to address immediate pressures — emergencies — which cannot by their nature be anticipated when the detailed budgeting exercise is carried out, there would be significant complaints and concerns raised. If we were not to have the kind of flexibility that in-year monitoring provides us with, we would have to resort to an exercise such as reducing expenditure on programmes that were already in train. Members would find themselves faced with unenviable choices in that situation.

While we endeavour to ensure that our budgetary planning is as precise and as focused as possible — I made this point to the Committee, and I did not hear any resiling from it — it is almost impossible to imagine a situation in which expenditure planned considerably in advance is going to be carried out in

precisely the manner and to the last pound that it was planned for at that initial point.

6.30 pm

As I explained in my opening remarks, the financial planning and budgetary cycle is lengthy. We are also in a time of transition, with new Departments undertaking new areas of work, and that can make it difficult to forecast accurately in advance. The Executive have agreed that we should look at our financial monitoring systems to see if we can understand the reasons for those underspends, with the aim of improving our forecasting.

The Executive programme funds referred to by Patricia Lewsley are a means by which the Executive are determined to break away from inherited spending patterns and to ensure that resources are targeted in line with the Executive's strategic priorities. They are a clear response to the demand, frequently heard in this Chamber, that we should be innovative and break away from the old patterns of expenditure. I do not believe that we can break away completely. Many Members, upon scrutiny of current expenditure, would agree that much of it is well justified and necessary in order to ensure that the services that it is there to provide can continue to be delivered.

Notwithstanding that, the Executive have clearly stated that they want, within those constraints, to be innovative. We welcome views from Committees, and from the Floor of the House, with respect to how we might more effectively target Executive programme funds in future. Those funds represent a significant financial investment, and we need to be sure that they are achieving their objectives. We also wish to ensure that the processes for managing and allocating the funds are as efficient and effective as possible.

That is why the Executive are carrying out a review of the operation of the Executive programme funds. That review has been informed by the report of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. While the Executive have still to consider the review, there are some issues that will need to be addressed, such as the promotion of cross-cutting work by Departments and greater administrative simplicity.

Many Members, including Seamus Close, John Kelly and Jane Morrice, referred to the problems in health and personal social services. I should not forget to add to that list Robert McCartney, who made one of his infrequent appearances among us this afternoon. Those problems are of great concern to the Executive, and we recognise that there are very real problems that need to be addressed. Next year, health spending will be some £224 million higher than the provision for the current year. That is almost 10% — 9.7%, for those who are keen on mathematical accuracy. That represents a very significant addition and clearly demonstrates the importance that we attach to that area. I recognise

that some Members may not consider that level of funding to be anywhere near adequate.

As an Executive, we have to live within our overall budget, and additional funding for health and social care means less funding for some other area. The scale of the challenge facing the Executive has been made very clear today by the number of calls for increased spending on a variety of different programmes.

I also remind Members of the positive steps which the Executive have taken to control deficits and to try to ensure proper financial management and control in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. In response to a point raised by Jane Morrice, I confirm that the need for resources of £10 million for trust deficits was drawn to the Assembly's attention in Mark Durkan's statement on June monitoring. It is not something new that has been sprung upon us today. The Executive's decision was made public during the summer recess.

We also need to recognise that additional resources represent only part of the solution. We must ensure that the expenditure that we are allocating is used to the greatest possible effect. To that end, we are carrying out a needs and effectiveness evaluation into health and social care so that we can better understand what we achieve with what we spend.

Members will appreciate that there are no easy answers. We will be paying careful attention to the question of health expenditure in our analysis of next year's spending review. The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel questioned the proposed local strategic partnership formula. This issue has caused concern, and I attempted to address it earlier during Question Time. I can confirm that the proposed allocations are consistent with the overall objectives of the Peace II programme, and that the use of population weighted by deprivation is a specific European Commission requirement in the operational programme.

Francie Molloy also called for greater investment west of the Bann, invoking new targeting social need as the basis for his call. The policy aims to tackle social need and social exclusion throughout Northern Ireland. This will mean using more of our existing resources to benefit people and areas in greatest objective social need. It also means delivering our policies in ways that are more helpful to those in need. New targeting social need is implemented through a range of policies and programmes, and I am confident that it will have a positive impact on tackling unemployment and addressing inequality wherever those problems exist.

Eddie McGrady raised the question of additional funding announcements for English programmes such as health, education and transport. I can confirm that my officials closely monitor those areas as part of their regular liaison with the Treasury. Of course, any resultant

resources are referred to the Executive for decisions on allocation, usually in the next available monitoring round, rather than simply going to the comparable programme here. However, I caution Members to read the small print when they hear announcements made in Whitehall or elsewhere before making points about an immediate consequential allocation here, proportionate to what may or may not have been announced across the water.

Mr McGrady asked whether funding was available for the implementation of the Hayes review. The Executive will shortly be considering how to take that review forward and will be carefully examining the potential expenditure implications over the coming months. Mr McGrady also asked about residential care for the elderly. Last year, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety established an inter-departmental working group to examine the costs and implications of introducing free personal care. Once this group reports its findings, the Executive will need to consider the implications of this policy in light of their other priorities.

The same Member also raised the identification of additional sources of funding for public services. This is a key area for further consideration, and its importance to the Executive is evidenced by its inclusion as a priority in the Programme for Government, with actions on such issues as public-private partnerships and a review of rating policy.

Eddie McGrady, Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Rev Dr William McCrea raised the issue of funding for agricultural development in 2002-03. The position on the vision group has been advised to the Assembly on several occasions. The consultation period has ended, and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has begun to draw up a strategic plan of action to take the process forward. Early retirement and new entrants schemes will be considered as part of the action plan. As yet, no funds have been allocated to implement the vision group's recommendations in 2002-03. As Members will appreciate from what I have just said, a great deal of the hard work is being undertaken to formulate the precise proposals that arise out of the vision group's report.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley raised the issue of a definition of rural proofing. Executive approval to a formal definition of rural proofing has not yet been given. However, the concept of rural proofing is a process that ensures that all relevant Executive policies are examined carefully and objectively to determine whether they have a different impact in rural areas. It examines the characteristics of rural areas and, where necessary, what policy adjustments may be made to reflect rural needs and to ensure that, as far as possible, public services are accessible on a fair basis to the rural community.

Ian Paisley Jnr and Jane Morrice asked why payments in respect of animal disease compensation have risen sharply in recent years, and George Savage also raised the issue of variations. It has been normal practice to allocate additional resources to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in-year to meet pressures in that area. However, steps were taken in the 2000 spending review to enable the baseline to reflect the needs more accurately. Reviews of all aspects of control measures for brucellosis and tuberculosis are currently under way, and consideration will be given to the introduction of further, or different, measures to lower their incidences. The reviews will be completed in two to three months.

Jane Morrice sought confirmation that no moneys would be returned to Brussels from the Peace I programme. Our latest estimates show that we expect to achieve a full spend under the programme, although it will be some time before we receive formal confirmation of that. With respect to pensions and their allocation in the Department of Finance and Personnel budget, the costs are borne in annually managed expenditure and, therefore, do not restrict or affect the pressures available for allocation by the Executive.

With regard to the detail, the main reason for the £19 million rise is increased transfer costs — in other words, scheme members who transfer to other schemes. The second reason for the increase is the early retirement of members who have reached 60 years of age. They fall within the scope of the scheme for the first time. The age profile of the Civil Service and a consequent higher number of staff reaching retirement age also contribute to the increase.

Rev Dr William McCrea raised a point about nurses. Some years ago there was a reduction in the numbers entering training for nursing, which has led to a decline in the numbers entering the profession. The Department recently increased the numbers to be admitted to training, but it will take some time to increase the numbers working in the profession. Sammy Wilson suggested that better use of resources allocated to North/South bodies could be achieved by channelling those resources elsewhere, especially to health.

I remind Members of the Assembly that — as I have attempted to underline several times — health is a priority of the Executive. However, that is not to say that we should spend all of our money on health and none on anything else.

6.45 pm

As Members will be aware through reports brought to the Floor of the House by Ministers attending meetings of the Council, the North/South Ministerial Council is developing programmes of considerable benefit in a wide range of areas, from trade, to education, to cultural matters of benefit to communities North and South. As

the projects associated with the plans of the North/South Ministerial Council and its various implementation bodies roll out, the establishment of the Council will be vindicated by the benefits which will be felt, particularly in border areas, and throughout the North and South.

I have attempted to cover almost all of the main points made by Members in their contributions. However, I am aware that I have been unable to cover all of the points that they have raised. Those that have not been touched upon in my concluding remarks will receive a written response, either from myself or from the Minister directly responsible.

Once again, I want to acknowledge that I regard this debate as having been significant, certainly for myself, as I am still in my infant days with regard to the responsibilities in the Department of Finance and Personnel. The learning curve is steep, but it has been a helpful contribution to progressing up that curve, whether from Members whose remarks were highly critical of what I, as spokesperson for the Executive today, am attempting to do or from the smaller number whose remarks were complimentary. Nonetheless, I acknowledge Members' contributions in both respects.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a further sum not exceeding £198,035,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2002 and that further resources, not exceeding £574,419,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2002 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 2(b) and 3(b) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2001-02 that was laid before the Assembly on 11 February 2002.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £3,936,009,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2003 and that resources, not exceeding £4,486,387,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas for the year ending 31 March 2003 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2002-03 document that was laid before the Assembly on 11 February 2002.

— [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel.*]

Adjourned at 6.51 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 12 February 2002

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Agriculture

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in its agriculture sectoral format that took place on 25 January 2002 in Enniskillen.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The fifth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in its agriculture sectoral format was held at the Manor House Hotel, Killadeas, in County Fermanagh on 25 January 2002. The Minister of the Environment, Mr Foster, accompanied me to that meeting, which I chaired, and he has agreed the contents of this statement. Mr Joe Walsh TD, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, represented the Government of the Republic of Ireland.

The Council noted the progress made by the various working groups on the programme of work spanning areas of animal health. It was noted that the working groups had met and produced action plans for future work. The Council received an informative presentation by a senior official from the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, outlining the current position on various animal diseases in the two jurisdictions. The Council endorsed a joint paper on animal health on the island of Ireland and asked the animal health steering group and working groups to continue their work with a view to developing closer co-operation and joint strategies for the improvement of animal health on both sides of the border.

The Council noted that both Administrations were committed to conducting a review of the foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks and that restrictions on animal movements continued to be applied in both jurisdictions. Progress has been made in developing a common

approach to the identification of sheep and pigs and on the introduction of common approaches to Aujeszky's disease.

At a previous meeting of the Council it was agreed that a joint approach should be developed to pursue the eradication of scrapie among sheep. The Council expressed the hope that the joint approach would ensure the ultimate eradication of scrapie from the whole island and that, in the meantime, normal trade would continue in accordance with Community rules.

The Council reiterated that its priorities in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations should be the protection of the ability to export to Third-World countries and the retention of the WTO "blue box" exemption for direct payments to farmers.

Since the last meeting of the Council in its agriculture format, a new round of multilateral trade negotiations under the auspices of the WTO has been launched at the WTO ministerial conference in Doha, Qatar last November. The Council discussed the key elements of the subsequent declaration relating to agriculture and agreed to keep progress under review.

The Council noted and supported the active co-operation between the two Departments of Agriculture on the implementation of the common agricultural policy (CAP). Recent discussions between the two Departments focused on the changes to the EU Integrated Administration and Control System (IACS) regulations, CAP simplification, the sheep retention period for 2002, sheep irregularity cases, reform of the sheepmeat regime and use of discretionary beef national envelope funds in 2002.

The Council also noted a progress report submitted by the steering committee on cross-border rural development and the fact that the committee will advise Ministers on appropriate follow-up action regarding the two studies commissioned by the steering committee. Those studies relate to co-operation between cross-border rural communities and cross-border rural development, education, training and research. The Council was also pleased to note that the European Commission has agreed the Ireland/Northern Ireland INTERREG III operational programme.

The Council acknowledged a positive report on the existing liaison between the two jurisdictions on plant health matters, which extends to both technical and scientific co-operation. It encouraged the relevant authorities to pursue the areas suggested for extended co-operation in plant health research and development. The secretariat tabled a paper to seek the Council's confirmation of the appointment of a new chief executive of Foras na Gaeilge, the Irish language body, and the Council confirmed that appointment.

The next meeting in agriculture sectoral format will take place in the South. However, given the proximity of elections in the South, a date has not yet been agreed. It is hoped that a firm date for a meeting can be finalised as soon as possible. The text of a communiqué for issue following the meeting was agreed, and a copy of it has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Mr McGrady: The Minister kindly received delegations from my constituency and therefore knows of the great concern about the proliferation of bovine tuberculosis (TB), particularly the clusters in south Down and the border regions. What further action will she take in conjunction with her partner Department in the South to co-ordinate the eradication of the disease? Will she consider the creation of a pilot scheme such as that in Monaghan, which seems to be giving positive indications of the eradication of bovine TB in that area? Can such a scheme be applied to some of the disease hot spots in south Down?

Ms Rodgers: Mr McGrady has been active in pushing me to act on the issue. The North/South Ministerial Council received a report that action plans had been agreed by the working parties. Minister Walsh and I have asked the working parties to produce concrete action plans. I hope that joint strategies will be agreed by the end of the year. I am well aware of the problems of TB and brucellosis, particularly in the hot spots that Mr McGrady referred to. The working groups have discussed all of those matters. I will have more details about the matter and an agreement on a joint strategy before the end of the year.

Mr J Wilson: I draw the Minister's attention to the statement in the report that the Council noted that both Administrations were committed to conducting reviews of the foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks. Does the Minister not expect that an attempt will be made by one jurisdiction to lay blame on the other, particularly with regard to any activity that preceded the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease and any activity that both jurisdictions engaged in to bring the crisis to an end?

Ms Rodgers: I do not anticipate that either jurisdiction will lay blame on the other. Both worked extremely well together throughout the crisis to contain the spread of the disease. In the initial stages there was close co-operation between the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the South. Indeed, the quick action of my Department in tracing the missing sheep, despite the difficulties, was acknowledged as having had a major impact on preventing the further spread of the disease.

The review is being carried out on both sides of the border. On this side of the border there will be an independent consultative review, which will have its own independent secretariat. It will be able to talk to whomever it likes, on either side of the border. I

envisage that the review being carried out in the South will be equally independent, and I do not foresee any difficulties between the two jurisdictions on this.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement from the Minister and the work that is being done by the rural development groups and the cross-border bodies on INTERREG, the work that is being done by the World Trade Organisation — though I am not sure whether I agree with the direction it is taking — and the appointment of the chief executive to Foras na Gaeilge, the Irish language body.

I have two questions for the Minister on foot-and-mouth disease and brucellosis. Can the Minister assure the House that foot-and-mouth disease cannot now reach Ireland, given that there is little change in Britain with regard to the import of meat products from susceptible countries? Is there not a threat to the disease-free status of the South from the increase in the incidence of brucellosis along the border?

Ms Rodgers: I know that Minister Beckett across the water is looking at the threat from Third-World countries and others with a view to ensuring that it is dealt with. Our port controls in the island of Ireland remain in place. There have been complaints about the strictness of those controls, but people cannot have it both ways. I am not referring to Mr McHugh — but I have been told that I am too strict about refusing access to vehicles because they have not been properly cleansed and disinfected. I may also be criticised for not doing enough. The Department will remain cautious and keep its guard up at the ports. That is the best way of guaranteeing that the island, North or South, does not import the disease via Northern Ireland.

Can the Member repeat his question on brucellosis?

Mr McHugh: Could the South lose its disease-free status due to the continuing presence of brucellosis in areas such as County Armagh?

Ms Rodgers: The Department has been carrying out a review of its disease controls with a view to tightening them. Mr McHugh will be aware that it has stepped up its testing, from biennial to annual, in the areas that are most affected. The Department is doing everything possible to curb the worrying increase that has occurred in recent years and to ensure that the disease is eradicated.

10.45 am

Mr Dallat: Perhaps the Minister will allow me the luxury of staring into agriculture's crystal ball. Has the Minister any plans to bring any of the proposals contained in the vision group's report before the North/South Ministerial Council?

Ms Rodgers: There are several recommendations with a North/South dimension in the vision group's report, especially on animal health. There seems to be widespread support in the North for an all-island policy on animal and plant health. The report also includes recommendations on the potential for North/South co-operation on research and development; food branding; equine issues; and on representing the interests of the two parts of the island on the common agricultural policy, particularly in its forthcoming review. I may bring forward proposals in those areas to the North/South Ministerial Council, once I have completed my assessment of the vision group's recommendations.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Can the Minister tell the House how much the meeting cost and how those costs were met? Is the Minister aware that a vaccination exists for brucellosis? Has the Department costed the use of that vaccination? Does the Department have any evidence that farmers have deliberately spread the disease? Some of the material that I have seen indicates that the disease cannot be deliberately spread. Has the Minister any definite information on the alleged spread of the disease?

Ms Rodgers: I thank Mr Paisley Jnr for his questions. I did not write them down, so I will try to remember them all — I think that there were three or four.

I do not have the cost of the North/South Ministerial Council meeting to hand, although I will certainly be able to supply it.

Allegations of deliberate infection of herds with brucellosis have been made. Mr Paisley is aware that several cases are being looked at and several compensation payments have been withheld. It would be wrong of me to comment further at this stage.

Ms Lewsley: The Minister mentioned the common agricultural policy in a previous answer. Can she expand on the progress that is being made on developing a common approach to the reform of the policy?

Ms Rodgers: I have discussed and agreed with Joe Walsh, Minister for Agriculture, Food and Rural Development in the South, a set of common concerns about and priorities for the future development of the common agricultural policy and the related issues of EU enlargement and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations. We have agreed to continue to review developments on those matters and have agreed common priorities for our approach to the forthcoming review of the common agricultural policy.

Mr O'Neill: I welcome the Minister's statement and thank her and her colleague, Mr Walsh, for all their hard work.

The Minister said that some work has been done on the scrapie menace. Can the Minister give a little more detail on progress on the establishment of an all-Ireland scrapie eradication programme?

Ms Rodgers: Under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council, I have agreed with Minister Walsh to tackle jointly the eradication of scrapie from the island of Ireland. The nature of the disease and of the sheep population in Ireland make it sensible to have a unified approach. We have agreed that that will be pursued by genotyping and culling susceptible and affected animals.

While the approaches in each jurisdiction may differ in detail, they each involve the removal of scrapie-infected and scrapie-susceptible animals from flocks. There will be controls on restocking aimed at ensuring that there will be no subsequent reinfection from the environment. That approach will ensure that scrapie is ultimately eradicated from the island of Ireland and that, in the meantime, normal trade may continue in accordance with EU rules.

Public consultation on the proposals for the Northern Ireland scrapie plan ended on 14 January 2002, and officials are considering the responses to it. Our proposals include a voluntary scheme that involves genotyping, which is a method of breeding resistance to scrapie into the sheep population, and other focused eradication measures such as slaughtering sheep that are infected with scrapie. Those proposals are designed to take advantage of the low incidence of scrapie in Northern Ireland. The aim is to reduce incidences of scrapie and ultimately to eliminate it from the Northern Ireland flock. The all-Ireland strategy is aimed at eliminating scrapie from the whole island.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat. Was there any discussion of the spreading of slurry on the whole island on foot of the EU Directive? Mr Noel Dempsey, the Minister for Environment and Local Government in the other part of this island, has discussed the control of slurry spreading to prevent the spread of brucellosis among wildlife.

Ms Rodgers: There was no discussion of the spreading of slurry at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in Fermanagh.

Mr Ervine: Is the Minister satisfied with the style and nature of our representation with the World Trade Organisation? Will she explain exactly what that representation is?

Ms Rodgers: We do not represent a sovereign Government, and therefore we do not attend meetings of the WTO. However, we are represented at the WTO negotiations by the UK Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The WTO negotiations will have implications for everyone, and will have an impact on the review of the common agricultural policy (CAP). As a regional Minister, together with my counterparts in Wales and Scotland, I have an input into the formulation of UK policy on all those issues. Although the

regional Ministers are not present at the negotiations, our input is considered. The matter has also been discussed with my ministerial colleague in the South, and we have agreed our priorities in respect of CAP.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Minister's statement, and congratulate her on her selection as Politician of the Year. I am sure that all Members, in the spirit of goodwill and generosity that characterises the House, will join me in congratulating her. Her selection is a recognition of her tremendous leadership of this community during the foot-and-mouth disease epidemic. That leadership continues and is exemplified in her statement today —*[Interruption]*.

I am sorry; I did not hear that.

Mr Paisley Jnr: She is deputy leader.

Mr A Maginness: I congratulate the Minister on that also. What are her views on the recently published report of the policy commission on agriculture in England?

Ms Rodgers: I thank Mr Maginness for his kind remarks, and thank the Assembly for having honoured me with its recognition as Politician of the Year. The vote was a recognition of the way in which the Assembly, the Executive and the Agriculture Committee worked together at a difficult time to achieve a good result for the people of Northern Ireland.

For the information of Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Maginness has warmly congratulated me on my appointment as deputy leader. Therefore, there was no need for the Member to have made that point.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I am glad to hear that; that is a real relief.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Rodgers: Mr Maginness asked about the policy commission. It is important to remember that its remit covers only England. The commission has made recommendations on several issues that must be addressed at a UK level. The four UK Agriculture Ministers will discuss those issues as appropriate, and any subsequent action will be subject to collective decision. Yesterday I met my Scottish and Welsh colleagues in Edinburgh, and such matters were discussed.

The report is comprehensive, and I wish to study it carefully before I make any substantive comments. Many of the problems and challenges faced by farmers in Northern Ireland are similar to those faced by farmers elsewhere in the UK and beyond. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the methods proposed to tackle those issues are similar to those measures recommended in the vision report, which was geared to examining problems and proposed solutions from a Northern Ireland perspective.

Nevertheless, there may be ideas in the commission's report that we might wish to explore to determine whether they could be of benefit to Northern Ireland farmers. However, I stress again that the policy commission's remit covered only England; it did not relate to any of the regions.

BUDGET BILL

First Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren):

I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA Bill 2/01] to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31 March 2002 and 2003; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance and Personnel to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for the years ending 31 March 2002 and 2003; and to revise the limits on the use of certain accruing resources in the year ending 31 March 2002.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of pending business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

I have received notification in respect of the Bill from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel that the requirements of Standing Order 40 have been fully met in terms of appropriate consultation. It is, therefore, in order for the Budget Bill to proceed with accelerated passage.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (BEST VALUE) BILL

Further Consideration Stage

Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Local Government (Best Value) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

GAMING (VARIATION OF MONETARY LIMITS) ORDER (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2001

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds):
I beg to move

That the Gaming (Variation of Monetary Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2001 (SR 414/2001) be approved.

The Order will raise certain monetary limits in the Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 that apply to commercial and non-commercial gaming. Those, and other limits, in the 1985 Order are minor issues that are routinely reviewed by subordinate legislation to maintain their relative value.

Articles 2, 3 and 4 refer to the monetary limits that apply to commercial bingo clubs that have been licensed by the courts. Article 2 deals with the limit placed on weekly winnings on games of "link bingo" in such clubs. "Link bingo" is the name given to bingo games that are played simultaneously in different clubs. Article 3 refers to the limit on the amount by which a bingo club proprietor may top up the stake money. The 1985 Order allows licensed bingo clubs to offer gaming for small prizes, subject to certain conditions. Article 4 of the Order deals with the limits on such gaming.

11.00am

Articles 5 and 6 apply to non-commercial gaming. Article 5 applies to small-scale gaming such as bridge, whist drives and bingo, organised for charitable purposes, under article 126 of the 1985 Order. Article 6 of this subordinate Order applies to the small charges that certain clubs may make for non-banker, equal-chance gaming, including bingo, under article 128 of the 1985 Order. Article 7 will revoke the previous provisions, which last raised the limits contained in the present Order and which are now redundant.

I commend the Order to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Gaming (Variation of Monetary Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2001 (SR 414/2001) be approved.

ASSEMBLY:

BUSINESS COMMITTEE

Resolved:

That Mr PJ Bradley replace Dr Alasdair McDonnell on the Business Committee. — [*Mr Tierney.*]

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE CENTRE

Postal Ballot Papers

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee of the Centre 'Report into the proposal to record the return of postal ballot papers' (01/01R) and agrees that it be submitted to the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions as a report of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

In November 2001, the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions issued a consultation paper seeking views on the proposal to amend the various representation of the people regulations to provide for the official recording of the receipt of postal ballot papers. A copy of the paper was sent to the Assembly. At its meeting on 4 December 2001, the Business Committee agreed that the consultation paper should be referred to the Committee of the Centre to prepare a response on the Assembly's behalf. The Committee considered the paper on 12 December and agreed to seek written views from several bodies on the issues raised in the document. Written submissions were received from the Information Commissioner, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, and the de Borda Institute. The Committee thanks those bodies for taking time to respond to its request for information. The proposal is to allow the receipt of postal ballot papers to be recorded officially by electoral administrators, and views were sought on the principle of the proposal and on the practicalities of its implementation.

Under present procedures, the electoral register is marked to show that a ballot paper has been issued to a postal voter. The principal purpose of the mark is to prevent a voter who subsequently goes to a polling station from double-voting. However, the marked register does not record whether the postal ballot is returned. The Committee considered in some detail the proposal and its implications. It noted that, if the proposal is adopted, those inspecting the marked register will be able to identify who has returned a postal vote. Members know that the position is the same for those voting in

person, as the register is marked to show that an individual has been issued with a ballot paper at the polling station.

In his response to the Committee, the Chief Electoral Officer expressed some concern about the proposal. He was concerned about the possible perception that, in noting the return of a postal ballot paper, someone could note how a person had voted, and that this could lead to a loss of confidence in the democratic process. The Committee considered this carefully and concluded that the opportunity for noting how a person had voted would be limited and that the risk to the secrecy of the ballot would therefore be very low.

Inspection of the marked registers is provided for under legislation. The principal users are candidates and political parties who use the data to establish voting patterns and trends. In addition, some electors have expressed a wish to have a way of checking that their ballot papers have been received. There is currently no way to do this. In its submission to the Committee, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission commented that

"It is unsatisfactory that, at present, people who use postal votes have no way of finding out whether their ballot paper arrived."

The Committee agrees and considers that procedures should be put in place for the receipt of postal ballot papers to be recorded officially.

The Committee also examined the practical implications of the proposal. The consultation paper proposed that the return of an individual's postal voting documents should be recorded when the declaration of identity is checked, and the Committee agrees that that is the most appropriate point at which to record the information. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission highlighted that that is an area where Northern Ireland legislation differs from that in Great Britain and advised the Committee that if a ballot paper is returned without an accompanying declaration in Northern Ireland it is immediately ruled out, even if a declaration that matches it arrives separately. The Committee considered that the same procedures should apply throughout the United Kingdom and recommends that the legislation in Northern Ireland regarding the matching of declarations of identity and postal ballots be brought into line with legislation in Great Britain.

The other practical issue to be considered is where such information should be recorded. The consultation paper sets out two options. The first is to record the information on the marked electoral register that is used in each polling station, which would result in one consolidated list. That would mean that the process of marking the register with returned postal votes would have to be completed once the registers are returned from the polling stations — that is, after the count.

The second option considered in the paper is to record the information on the list of postal voters maintained by the electoral registration officer. That would result in a separate record — a marked postal voters list. That information could be recorded as and when the postal votes are opened. It would then be up to anyone wishing to inspect the records to obtain both sets of data.

The Committee is aware that recording the information on the marked electoral register that is used in each polling station to produce one consolidated list might cause some additional administrative work for staff in the Electoral Office. However, according to the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, the Electoral Office would be able to cope with the requirement once its new computer system, with suitable enhancements, is installed. The Committee concluded that there are advantages in having one consolidated list and recommends that the information should be recorded on the marked electoral register.

The Committee considered two related issues during its deliberations. In its submission to the Committee, the Human Rights Commission expressed reservations about the use of the electoral register for purposes not connected with elections, such as its sale for commercial use, and suggested that the regulations should restrict access to those who can show an election-related need for the information. The Committee considered this and agreed that individuals should be able to choose whether personal information held on the electoral register can be used for commercial purposes. The Committee considers that, in general, the electoral register should be used only for the purposes of public or court administration, and access should be limited to those who can show an election-related need for the information. The Committee has made reference to this in its report.

Finally, the Committee was advised that, in Northern Ireland, postal ballot papers can be returned by post or handed in to electoral offices. However, there is no provision for postal ballot papers to be handed in to polling stations, as is the case in Great Britain. The Committee gave some consideration to this anomaly and recommends in its report that provision should be made for postal ballot papers to be handed in to polling stations in Northern Ireland.

I commend the report to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee of the Centre 'Report into the proposal to record the return of postal ballot papers' (01/01R) and agrees that it be submitted to the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions as a report of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

GOLDEN JUBILEE

Mr Morrow: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education in this, Her Majesty's Golden Jubilee year, to ensure provision is made for each primary school pupil in Northern Ireland to be provided with a suitable souvenir to mark this important and historic occasion.

In any circumstances, whether individually or collectively, celebrating 50 years of service is a special and, indeed, a unique occasion — and for no one more so than Her Majesty The Queen, who has served this nation with dignity and responsibility during the past 50 years. Our constitutional monarchy has brought stability to our United Kingdom, and Her Majesty has provided much wise counsel to the many Prime Ministers who have served her during her reign. Today we want to act with dignity and mark this special occasion in the manner that I feel it deserves.

This motion is not intended to be either divisive or offensive to anyone. It is intended to recognise the service given to the United Kingdom by Her Majesty, and it calls for this special year in our history to be marked in a way that is simple, yet reflective. Our children should be given the opportunity to receive a souvenir to commemorate the 50 years that Her Majesty has spent as head of state, just as children were given a souvenir at the time of the Queen's coronation. I suspect that many in the Assembly can recall that time and can look back to when they were at school and were given a memento to mark the Queen's coronation. They may not have placed much emphasis on it at the time. Indeed, they may not have seen it as important. However, having spoken to many who can recall that occasion — *[Interruption]*.

Mr O'Neill: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you explain to the House the use of a Dispatch Box for Members? Is it available for all Members to use, or are we setting a new precedent this morning?

Mr Speaker: Properly speaking, the use of Lecterns, in lieu of Dispatch Boxes, is for Ministers when speaking as Ministers, if they choose — and not all Ministers choose to use one — or Chairpersons of Committees, if they choose, when presenting on behalf of their Committees. I see that the matter is no longer an issue.

Mr Morrow: Mr Speaker, I humbly apologise to the House for taking advantage. The Box was there, and I thought it would not offend anyone if I used it. I want it recorded that I humbly apologise.

Mr Speaker: Had the Member had 50 years service in the House, no doubt he would have been accorded it.

Mr Morrow: That demonstrates that I can be humble.

Many types of souvenirs will be created during this special year, and I do not wish to be prescriptive about

the type or design of souvenir. I believe that every primary schoolchild should have an opportunity to mark the jubilee tangibly, and if the Department of Education wants some ideas on what should be used, I am prepared to give it some. I suspect that it does not need that.

During the course of this debate there will be those who will say that Her Majesty is the British head of state and, as such, is not acceptable, or that many children could not participate. That is a poor argument. At the outset, I want to say that this should not be forced on every school. The option should be there, and it should be available to those schools and children who wish to avail of it. The Queen is the head of state of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so she is the head of state to everyone who lives in Northern Ireland, regardless of political opinion, religious belief, ethnic origin or anything else that people may feel distinguishes them. We all are her subjects by virtue of where we live — the United Kingdom.

11.15 am

There is no basis for the claim that the majority of primary schoolchildren have no interest in receiving a souvenir in recognition of the Golden Jubilee. I suspect that many schools in the Province would welcome the opportunity to give their pupils a suitable gift. Perhaps some Members are opposed to the motion because to provide such an opportunity would expose the inaccuracy of their claims that children have no interest. I suggest that caution be taken. The Department of Education should not fall into the trap of restricting history and distorting reality. Why should schools not be given the choice of whether or not to present their pupils with a souvenir? Those who vote against the motion will deny every school in the Province that choice. If the Assembly were to reject the motion, it would deny the up-and-coming generation the unique opportunity to have a memento of the Queen's Golden Jubilee for years to come.

Some said, during the run-up to the debate, that the motion involves an element of flag-waving or an attempt to get one over on someone. That is not in my thoughts. It is an opportunity to recognise 50 years in which the Queen has served the United Kingdom with distinction and honour.

We are supposed to be living in an era of parity of esteem in which everybody's view is of equal status. I hope that the House will seize the opportunity to demonstrate tangibly to the Minister of Education that schools should have a choice and that the Department of Education should place at schools' disposal a suitable souvenir to mark the Queen's Golden Jubilee. We ask for no more, and I trust that Members will support the motion.

Mr Speaker: I have received one amendment to the motion, which is published on the Marshalled List of amendments in the name of Mrs E Bell.

Mrs E Bell: I beg to move the following amendment: In line 2, after "ensure" insert:

"where the board of governors deems it appropriate, that".

One of my earliest childhood memories is of being in a small parlour house in the Falls Road area, watching the Queen's coronation together with many other families. I do not remember much about the ceremony, but I remember how the young Queen was serious and controlled. She realised that she had a demanding life in front of her. That was the general feeling in the room, and nothing but tribute was paid to her. As time has passed, those thoughts have, in many ways, been proved correct. I hope that this jubilee year will be another resounding memory for all of us and, of course, for the Queen. The death of the Queen's sister was tragic, but it is to be hoped that she will still be able to take pride in her Golden Jubilee year.

I remember the Queen's Silver Jubilee. I lived in Windsor, where we held an enjoyable street party. The participating families were of different backgrounds, colours and creeds, but were united in their good wishes for the young Queen. Again I recall thinking that it would have been great if we could have had similar scenes throughout Northern Ireland in celebration of a life lived in duty and loyalty towards all citizens.

This year should be celebrated in Northern Ireland as much or as little as people wish. Ample opportunity should be given to note, or to not note, the historic occasion. Therefore, I hope that Members will view my amendment without prejudice, if that is possible in Northern Ireland. My reason for tabling the amendment is that I have several misgivings about the motion as it stands, not least on monetary grounds.

If the Department of Education is to ensure that a memento will be provided, it must be clear that schools will not bear the cost themselves. The Department must refer schools to the jubilee fund, which would allay budgetary pressures. In addition, district councils could be asked to become involved with local schools, because they too have had budget specifications for commemorative celebrations this year.

The decision for each school should be made by its board of governors, which is responsible to that school's pupils and staff. That board would know the feelings and circumstances of the school, its pupils, staff and parents. That would not be discriminatory, nor would it contravene equality Directives. It would simply be an understanding that each school will be different in its observance.

As regards different agendas, I suspect that the motion might produce attitudes that have more to do with the identity of the Minister of Education than with an acknowledgement of the Queen's work and commitment — I am aware that that does not apply to the proposer. I appeal to all shades of opinion in the

Chamber not to use the Golden Jubilee as an opportunity for another instance of intolerance or backward thinking. Rather, they should view it as a fitting tribute to Queen Elizabeth II on reaching her Golden Jubilee.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I inform the House, Mr Morrow and others that it is not the Department of Education, but the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure that is taking the lead in the Golden Jubilee celebrations — I am, however, sure that most people are aware of that. That was agreed by the Executive some time ago. I have a budget line, which the Department has been working on for many months. There has been an enormous response from across the Province.

By your leave, Mr Speaker, I intend to make a statement next week to fully inform Members of the position in respect of the Golden Jubilee celebrations, outlining the many applications that the Department has received and the types of celebrations planned. I have not done so this week by agreement with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport — the lead Department in London — and other devolved Administrations throughout the United Kingdom, as a mark of respect following the death of Princess Margaret last Saturday. None of my colleagues in the devolved Administrations or the Government in London will be making announcements on the Golden Jubilee this week.

I regret that this motion is being debated this week. It is unseemly that we should discuss it at this time. It would be unseemly to become involved in divisive political debate on the issue. The motion could have been debated next week or in previous weeks. It would have been better had Mr Morrow and his party followed the lead of the devolved Administrations and the Government in London by not getting involved in the issue as a mark of respect. For that reason, my party will not be taking part in the debate today.

Mr Gallagher: I strongly oppose the motion as a Member of the Assembly and as someone with a background in education. It is ridiculous that such a motion should come before the Assembly today, given that we all know that a variety of identities and allegiances exists in this community. I presume that the motion refers to one of the two main identities. However, many others do not want to receive the souvenir to which the motion refers. It is proposed in the motion that that souvenir should be imposed on those who do not want to receive it. We should all oppose that.

The SDLP is committed, as it has always been, to the creation of a just, tolerant and pluralist society. We should all know the dangers and drawbacks of imposing things on others, especially on those from different backgrounds.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClelland] in the Chair)

If I understood Mr Morrow correctly, I heard him refer to a pack that was provided for children by the education system in the coronation year. That was 50 years ago and, fortunately for all of us, things have moved on both politically and educationally. At that time, the education system discouraged the teaching of Irish history. In hindsight, we all know that that was a mistake, and one that we do not wish to repeat.

Speaking as an educationalist, I know that many subjects, such as mathematics, economics and languages, have a place in the education system. However, education in its truest sense goes further than that. Education is about the fundamental worth of each individual and the common good. It is about imparting the values to which I referred earlier — justice, tolerance and pluralism. Since education should be about the common good, that includes the common good of people of whatever identity, whatever their allegiance or political background. That is how we should manage education, and we should all aspire to that.

The motion threatens that notion, so I oppose it. If we want to have an education system that provides a safe haven for all, regardless of religious or political persuasion, we should reject the motion.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I wish to inform the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure — and he should be careful about what he says — that the motion was tabled weeks ago. It was not tabled following Princess Margaret's death. His party did not approach Mr Morrow and ask him to withdraw the motion this week, yet Mr McGimpsey castigates the DUP for moving the motion, and is lauded by people from the opposite side of the House for doing so. That shows the spirit of both the UUP and the SDLP. If they do not get their way, they think that they can gag Members of the Assembly. This is an elected Assembly, and it is the only part of the Assembly that has any degree of democracy. I resent what the Minister said. If he is concerned about a motion being tabled, and he feels that he has to wait until the following week to tell people what he is going to do, that is his business. However, he has no right to castigate the Democratic Unionist Party for moving the motion.

I find Mr Gallagher's attitude amazing. He talked about a "safe haven" in the schools, yet people of his religion boycott the state education system.

Mr Gallagher: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is it a point of order, Mr Gallagher?

Mr Gallagher: Yes, it is a point of order. I spoke about an education system that supports a society that provides a safe haven for all. I did not quite put it as — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not really a point of order.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The hon Member can say what he likes. When we read Hansard in the morning we shall find out what he said.

Mr Gallagher's particular belief is that schools should be segregated and the people with whom he worships should all go to a school that is separate from the state system.

11.30 am

That is a fact of life, which we all accept. If people want to have a separate school system, they are entitled to have it. Some people would say that they are also entitled to pay for it. That is a different story, and not for debate today.

I also find it amazing that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure is so concerned about this matter, given that, evidently, he was unconcerned about Princess Margaret's death. He knows that if the First Minister, supported by the Deputy First Minister, had moved a motion yesterday, we could have paid our tributes to Princess Margaret as they were paid in another place.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You are straying somewhat from the motion, Dr Paisley.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It is relevant to what Mr McGimpsey said. He should not have brought up those matters. He criticised us for our attitude to the death of Princess Margaret. I am entitled to defend myself. I am sure that you would be the first to defend my right to defend myself. We have to be realistic about this matter. I made my views known in the Chamber. We should have had a moment of silence. I noticed that they stood in silence in the imperial House at Westminster. I thought there would be conformity in all places. Evidently, that was not to be.

The motion is not asking for anything to be forced on anyone. It asks that the Department of Education should make a memento of this important event available to every schoolchild. If Mr McGimpsey has so much money in his kitty that he wants to pay for it, that is well and good. Nobody will argue with that.

It will be a long time before anyone will be able to celebrate another fiftieth anniversary of a Queen. Monarchs do not usually reign for 50 years. This is an unusual and special event. I go back quite a bit — more than 50 years. I am sure, Mr Deputy Speaker, that you also go back quite a bit. [*Laughter*] Members of the House should not despise age. If one has a halo as a result of one's age, it should not be despised. Some of us are fortunate to hold on to what little hair we have.

I remember the Silver Jubilee of King George V. We were all presented with a special mug, which I still have. I appreciate the fact that I was alive then and

was given that mug. Everyone went to Ballymena Showgrounds, where Ballymena Urban District Council, as it was called in those days, put on a grand display of games and other events, and every child received a memento. That was a most acceptable thing to do. People who do not want to receive a memento are quite entitled to say that they do not want one. I know of one school in Ballymena where, on the direction of the schoolmaster, the pupils took the mugs out and broke them against a wall. There were different views about these issues, even in those days. That will no doubt continue.

There is nothing in the motion that states that this should be forced on anyone. There was no need for the amendment to be tabled. The boards of governors will have control over the distribution of such a memento.

Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom — we are not in the Irish Republic yet. A Sinn Féin Member has told us that it already has a majority. In the next election we shall see who has the majority in this country. When I was a boy I was told that we would be outbred, but Protestant mothers have children too. The average Protestant family is much bigger today than it was when I was being brought up. The average Protestant family had two children, but now the average is four. There are those in this country who believe that their children should receive a memento, and they are entitled to want that. If that is going to bankrupt the education system, it must be almost bankrupt already.

Those arguments are puerile, but mine is sensible. I believe that most people on both sides of the religious divide want a memento, and they are entitled to that. The parents and the boards of governors should make that decision in the schools.

Mr A Maginness: I am unconvinced by Mr Morrow's arguments and his protestations of innocence on the motion. The motion is not about souvenirs; it is about party political advantage for the DUP. I agree with the Minister that this is not an appropriate time to table the motion. The SDLP has no problem whatsoever with people in Northern Ireland who wish to commemorate the Queen's jubilee; we support that. The former Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Durkan — now the Deputy First Minister — made funding available for that. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will use that money to celebrate the Queen's jubilee in an appropriate fashion.

The motion is mischievous, cynical, party political, unnecessary and inappropriate in the present circumstances. It has not been costed, and it is wrong for Members to table a motion asking a Department to expend money without properly costing the financial impact. There are 174,000 primary schoolchildren in Northern Ireland, so approximately £200,000 to £500,000 would be spent. The Department of Education could spend that

money more appropriately by assisting those children in the learning process.

The SDLP is unconvinced by the DUP's arguments. We believe that it is an example of its desire to impose a view of society upon all the people of Northern Ireland without regard to their political tradition or sensitivities. Therefore we believe that this is not a good motion, and it is inappropriate in the present circumstances. We believe in parity of esteem, and the Executive and the Departments should exercise that parity of esteem in dealing with the public. The motion does not do that. It is not sensitive, and it does not advance, in any way, goodwill and harmonious relations in our society.

However, despite our misgivings about the motion and given the Minister's announcement this morning, the SDLP believes that it would not be appropriate to oppose it in the present circumstances, so we shall abstain on the motion. On behalf of the SDLP, I believe that that is the most appropriate course of action. We shall also abstain on the amendment.

In conclusion, let me emphasise that the SDLP has no problems with people who wish to celebrate the Golden Jubilee in an appropriate manner. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has an allocation for that; it is the appropriate way to deal with it, and we support that.

Mr Shannon: Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise to support the motion. This is the fiftiet yeir fae Quean Elspeth cum heid o the Kingrik; it is an importin tid for ilkane o us. The'r juist the five ither monarchs paregal wi whit she's eftir winnin til, an it's e'en mair poignant in the licht o recent events the lyke o the affgaun o the Princess Mairgret. It gars ye think on juist whit wey the wumman that heids this lede haes putten ower throu the ondings o modren lyfe, bringin bairns intil the warld an the IRA's ettil at murtherin hir in the 1980s in the course o the bygaun for ti merk hir birthday in Hyde Park. It's a testament til Hir Majestie that she's haen the virr an smeddum ti gang on — for aw whit she's haed ti thole an the thraets til hir lyfe as cam forrit in the bygaen 50 yeir.

This is the fiftieth anniversary of the accession of Queen Elizabeth II, and it is a momentous occasion for us all. Only five other monarchs have ever achieved this, and it is even more poignant in the light of the recent death of Princess Margaret.

It is remarkable that the woman who heads this nation has weathered the storms of modern life — as a queen and as a mother — and also the IRA's attempt to kill her during a parade celebrating her birthday in Hyde Park in the 1980s. It is a testament that Her Majesty has had the strength of character to carry on despite the trials and tribulations, and the threats to her life that have been made over the past 50 years.

Her Majesty's inspiration to all children is of supreme importance so that they can carry out their duties as citizens with the dignity and commitment that she has shown over the past 50 years. It is for this reason that children across the Province — no matter what their religion or political background — should have some souvenir to remember a momentous occasion that may not be repeated in their lifetime. The occasion should be marked by something that the children can keep forever and that they can pass on to their children and to their children's children. Although we may have different political outlooks, it is imperative that all children are aware of all the traditions of this island, and that includes its association with the royal family. It would be honourable for the Minister to put aside his own political prejudice and doctrine and to think of what is good for the whole country. The party that the Minister belongs to harps on about embracing other cultures on the island of Ireland — let him prove it by giving children a suitable and lasting souvenir of the Queen's jubilee.

Yesterday in the Chamber Sinn Féin got its way and did not commemorate the passing of Princess Margaret with a minute's silence. However, Sinn Féin Members stood in silence for Americans and other nationals that were killed on 11 September. They stood for a minute's silence last month for the murdered postman, Daniel McColgan. Is it too much for them to accept that the royal family is not responsible for their problems and to show a little respect for the head of the country's sister?

Perhaps Sinn Féin does not like to admit that there is a huge interest in the royal family. One of the most popular magazines in the Republic of Ireland is called 'Majesty', and its appeal is to those who venerate a set of people that have everything that we shall never have: the position, elegance and lifestyle that we should all like to enjoy. Many residents of the Republic are as much in awe of the royal family and its nuances as the Unionist community is.

11.45 am

Every little girl across Northern Ireland, be she Protestant, Roman Catholic, Hindu or Muslim, dreams about being a princess and looks to real royals to infuse her dreams with a little inspiration and glamour. A souvenir is one way of giving those wannabe princesses a token that will bring them within breathing distance of their dream.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ní nach ionadh, beidh mise ag labhairt in éadan an rúin, agus, mar a dúirt mé, ní cuid iontais ar bith sin. I rise to speak against the motion — which is not surprising. I listened to what Mr McGimpsey said about the timing and unsuitability of the motion. Given the circumstances of this week, there is certainly an issue there.

I am charged with interpreting the motion from an Irish Republican standpoint, and I am happy to do that. I respect the views of others, but, equally, I expect Sinn Féin's views — and those of Nationalists, Republicans and those who do not regard themselves as Unionists — to be similarly listened to.

I have no problem with the celebration of this event by people who think that it is important. By the same token, I choose to commemorate the Easter Rising of 1916. As I have said before, 2003 is the bicentenary of the execution of Robert Emmet. Those are important historical events from a Republican perspective. We reasonably expect that the same level of recognition should be accorded to our historically important events.

In England, as well as in Ireland, many people ask about the relevance of the British monarchy in today's society. My opinion, which I suspect will not be respected, is that the British monarchy is a relic of Britain's colonial history — *[Interruption]*.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Absolute nonsense. Rubbish.

Mr McElduff: That is what the British monarchy is all about — imperialism — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is entitled to be heard.

Mr McElduff: To me, the British monarchy is a relic of Britain's colonial history.

In 2002 school-age children come from a variety of culturally diverse backgrounds. That was not the case in 1952, but it is the situation today. Unionists should take note of the reality that the majority of school-age children in the Six Counties now come from a Nationalist, Catholic background, as research and statistical experts stated in the 'Belfast Telegraph' last evening. Many other sources will attest to that. It is a fact; for some it is, perhaps, an unpalatable reality.

Belfast City Council voted £100,000 to celebrate the British jubilee, yet it is giving nothing to celebrate Saint Patrick's Day. That needs to be put on the political agenda.

My suggestion is that schools, above all places, should be kept neutral. The Department of Education is charged with providing the best possible education for all our children. It is not charged with celebrating the British monarchy. Allegations have, quite properly, been made that the DUP is playing politics and is flag-waving. Earlier this morning a DUP Member gave an interview about this subject on the BBC, quickly followed by his party leader, who totally opposed the notion that an English Catholic could either marry a British monarch or become a British monarch.

Therein lies the true agenda. This is flag-waving by the DUP; it is a party political agenda. As an Irish Republican — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McElduff: I will restate. As an Irish Republican my opinion is that the British monarchy is merely a relic of Britain's colonial past.

Mr Gibson: We have heard much about many people's memories of the coronation. This debate is about respect for one of the greatest and most brilliant concepts in the history of civilisation — a constitutional monarchy that allows the people to dictate the terms and thinking of a nation.

Despite Mr McElduff's rubbish allegations — when he talked about discrimination, or in McNamara's word, "scandal" — the day Mr McElduff decided to select a wife, he discriminated against, or scandalised, other women.

The constitutional monarchy gives us, as a nation, the ability to defend Catholic, neutral Belgium or to respond to the attack on Poland, which is another Catholic nation. In other words, it is a constitutional monarchy that believes in upholding its agreements. This morning we have seen the direct violation of the Belfast Agreement. The agreement has been proven not to work because Barry McElduff, as spokesman for Sinn Féin, has shown that that party does not respect, or think of accommodating, other precepts or concepts in the Assembly. Sinn Féin has no regard for, or intention of accommodating, the concept of a constitutional monarchy.

I compare the concept of the constitutional monarchy to the concept of blood sacrifice of 1916 that Mr McElduff mentioned, which was epitomised in the celebrations of the 1960s. That blood sacrifice gave us thirty years of mayhem. Perhaps the greatest outworking of that sacrifice occurred in the two months when Sinn Féin/IRA controlled the suicide of 10 of their own people. Nothing matters as long as the blood lust is satisfied.

There is a difference in concepts. I am almost ashamed that the SDLP, which has piggybacked on the IRA for the past 30 years, has said that it does not support the motion. That is probably a form of non-violent boycott, which that party uses as a way out. However, there is a comparison, which has been well demonstrated in the Chamber, between those who wish to respect a constitutional monarch and the precepts, precedence and principles that the monarch embodies and those who respect the blood sacrifice of thirty years of mayhem — epitomised by the deeds of the 1916 rebellion and from 1966 onwards.

I still have my coronation spoon as a memento of those bygone days, when, as a small boy in Omagh, I heard a historic proclamation read from the courthouse steps. It demonstrated the seamless continuity of the monarchy, "The King is dead, long live the Queen." A coronation spoon, which was chromium-plated and

probably worthless, is the memento I have to mark the fact that I was there to see the continuation of the concept of constitutional monarchy, which is probably no more perfect than any other human institution.

The death of Princess Margaret occurred this week. Despite her prestige and position, she struggled for many years to accept eventually the idea behind constitutional monarchy, that faith is the all-important personal precept. Therefore, if the Belfast Agreement is so all-accommodating and all-embracing, it should show respect to those Roman Catholics and others, who I believe are still the great majority, who support the idea of constitutional monarchy. If the Assembly cannot accommodate that, it is proof that the vision of blood sacrifice, so well demonstrated by Mr McElduff and supported by the massive contribution from the Minister of Education, is not wide enough to allow people to support the brilliant concept of constitutional monarchy and to respect it for 50 years of stability in this nation.

Rev Dr William McCrea: It is sad and regrettable that there are those in the Chamber today who seek to deny the people, and especially the children, of Northern Ireland the right, honour and privilege to celebrate 50 years of Her Majesty's reign.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland spoke recently about a cold place for Unionists. Unionists were not even allowed to stand in the Chamber yesterday to mark the death of Princess Margaret. One wonders whether the Chamber is becoming a cold place for Unionists. I am not surprised by the remarks of IRA/Sinn Féin. They tried to murder me, so why should I be surprised that they do not want to celebrate Her Majesty's reign? On my fortieth birthday I received a bomb. Life is supposed to begin at 40; mine was supposed to end, thanks to the Provisional IRA. Before the celebrated peace process the Provos' last act was to have been the murder of my wife and children. Therefore nothing that comes from the lips of those who would deny children the right to have a celebratory memento or souvenir surprises me. My children were to have been denied the right to life. Their souvenirs were to have been coffins.

Do not listen to the hypocrisy of Sinn Féin/IRA. The Member from West Tyrone says that schools should be kept neutral. Is this the same individual who campaigned against a member of the royal family visiting a school in Pomeroy, thereby denying children the right to see a royal person in case they might be contaminated if they stood in the same room?

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I hope that it is a point of order, Mr McElduff.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Do not worry — I will come back to him if it is not.

Mr McElduff: It is a point of order on the grounds of untruth, Mr Deputy Speaker. I had no involvement whatsoever in the matter that the Member is referring to.

12.00

Rev Dr William McCrea: Does anyone believe that? It was Sinn Féin/IRA and, to be quite honest, they are all from the same litter. Sinn Féin/IRA denied a royal personage the right to come to a school in my constituency. If they could not let the children even see a person coming to talk about education, why should we be surprised that they would not allow a child the right to have a souvenir?

It is interesting to note that, despite all this Republican anti-monarch and anti-Queen propaganda, people who support that propaganda love to run to the post office or the bank to get Her Majesty The Queen on banknotes. They love her very much when it comes to the day for paying out. That shows the brass neck of Republicanism and just exactly what Republicans stand for. However, I can understand it.

I can even understand the SDLP's perspective. I must challenge some remarks made by Alban Maginness. He said that the motion proposed the imposition of a souvenir on the children. The motion says

"That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education in this, Her Majesty's Golden Jubilee year, to ensure provision is made for each primary school pupil in Northern Ireland to be provided with a suitable souvenir to mark this important and historic occasion."

Nothing is being imposed — a provision is being made. In other words, if a school and the children want a souvenir, provision is made for it. In fact, the imposition is coming from the other side, because the SDLP suggests imposing on the Unionist family the denial of a right to a souvenir.

Other Members have spoken about what they received for the coronation. I remember Her Majesty's celebrations back then. I was only a wee nipper. I was dressed up as a sailor boy. My sister was dressed up as an angel, and my other sister, who was dressed up as Little Bo Peep with her sheep, won first prize in Stewartstown, County Tyrone.

We have those memories, but we are not allowed to have them any more. It is only one road, one side. Therefore it is an imposition. However, it is an imposition on the Unionist community, because the motion does not impose anything on any child from the Nationalist or Republican communities. There is no imposition; the motion makes provision for each child if the school desires it. What is wrong with that? I do not care whether it is the Department of Education or the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure that provides the souvenir.

I can understand the SDLP's perspective, but it was important to set the record straight because Mr Alban Maginness misunderstood. Having removed that misunderstanding, I hope that Mr Maginness and his Colleagues will not sit on the sidelines, but will come with the Unionist population rather than deny them their right.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Mr Gallagher denounced the motion and outlined his opposition to it in strong and strident tones. Mr Maginness then said that they were not to vote, that it would not do to vote and that it was not the time to vote. It seems very strange that from one voice we hear the denunciation of these evil Unionists who would dare to do such a thing, and then his leader — or half-leader, or whatever he is — says that they have all to go home and not vote at all.

Rev Dr William McCrea: The fact is that he desired to be deputy leader but did not actually make it.

I found Alban Maginness's tones more conciliatory than Mr Gallagher's. Divided voices within the SDLP may be common, but I trust that sense and reason will prevail in this. However, it is right to put the record straight, because Mr Maginness's argument for rejecting the motion was that it was an imposition.

This motion makes no imposition upon anyone. It makes provision. I understand to a certain extent the SDLP viewpoint, but I cannot understand the route taken to the House today by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. If anything is to be regretted or deplored, it is the position of the Ulster Unionist spokesperson in this debate. It is true that flags are being taken down in the councils, but now it seems that that same party does not want to give children the right to receive a souvenir of Her Majesty's Golden Jubilee from the Department of Education. That is a disgrace. Minister McGimpsey must have got out of the wrong side of the bed this morning, come to the House in a fit of pique and let his tongue get away before his brain went into gear, so ill-considered was what he said.

To say the least, it is pathetic to use the death of Princess Margaret as a reason. That is obnoxious, revolting and scurrilous. I remind the House that Her Royal Highness was still alive when my hon Friend put this motion before the Business Committee, where it was accepted and supported by the Ulster Unionist members. Perhaps Minister McGimpsey did not talk to some of his Colleagues to find out what happened at the Business Committee. It is usual to do that, because there are several voices from that party on the Committee.

That he came to the Chamber this morning and abused the death of Princess Margaret in that way is to be regretted. I trust that before the end of this debate the Minister will do the honourable thing and withdraw those despicable, scurrilous and needless remarks in which he tried to abort and destroy the motion before this House.

I have no doubt whatsoever that we will watch with care the various activities to be announced by his Department for Her Majesty's celebration. It is certainly not his right to deny children their right to a souvenir of Her Majesty's reign.

We have a right to be proud of the 50 years' service given by Her Majesty to the United Kingdom. She has given that service with honour. Like any other mother she has had her heartaches, but she has carried herself with great dignity, and she has ruled with honour. My hon Friend has today brought to the House a simple yet proper and appropriate motion to mark Her Majesty's Golden Jubilee. I trust that on better thought the rest of the House will give it support.

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): I am sorry that I was not present at the beginning of the debate. I was at the launch of the Anne Frank History for Today exhibition at Queen's University Students' Union. I apologise for that; the debate was not expected to start until later.

I have only a few things to say in response. It is important that events such as this do not prove divisive. Participation should be therefore a matter of choice, and I support that approach.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is co-ordinating the Golden Jubilee celebrations. I know that the Minister has taken a close interest. He is keen to encourage the involvement of schools, should they choose to become involved. There is a range of events and opportunities in which any parents' association or parent-teacher association can choose to participate.

The main event for schools is a special poetry competition that is open to pupils aged seven to 18. It is divided into three age groups and has the Golden Jubilee as its theme. Schools may submit up to three entries in each age category. The subject matter of poems can range from Queen Elizabeth of England to social or historical events from the past 50 years. Therefore, there is a great deal of scope for the budding poets. Mr McGimpsey attended the launch of the competition in Buckingham Palace in early October last year. The closing date for entries is 31 March.

Schools and parents' associations may run their own event for the jubilee; they may receive special funding for that purpose. Applications can be made to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and several primary and post-primary schools have already made applications.

I appreciate some Members' views on my Department's provision of a souvenir for primary school-children here. However, I see no justification in spending public funds that would be more effectively used in the classroom.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Member to refer to the Queen as the Queen of England? She is the Queen of the United Kingdom. Of course, he would not believe in that, but he is happy to be a so-called Minister of the Crown.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am not sure that that was a point of order.

Mrs E Bell: This has been an interesting debate that has almost acknowledged the intention of the motion. However, I was right to predict that the debate would also border on somewhat intolerant attitudes.

I am aware that, as the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure said, the debate may have been ill-timed. Nevertheless, it took place, and I assert that my amendment would make specific what the DUP Members hinted at. That is, a souvenir would not be obligatory; each school would make its own decision. Therefore, all schools would be able to deal with the issue appropriately. In the interest of inclusiveness, I ask the mover of the motion, Mr Morrow, to include the amendment in his motion. However, if he does not agree to that, I beg Members to support the amendment.

Mr Morrow: I thank those who participated in the debate. It has stimulated some interesting comments, and I sincerely thank those who found it within themselves to support the motion. They have fully grasped what we are trying to do, and I acknowledge their remarks. All Members have expressed themselves exceptionally well.

I listened intently to Mr Gallagher. He may be some things to some people, but he has a habit of coming across in a belligerent, sectarian way. Of course, that is the way that he is made, and he cannot hide that. He came across in that way today. However, he should, perhaps, have listened to his comrade, Mr Alban Maginness, because he was speaking in a completely different direction. That is a matter for Mr Gallagher and Mr Maginness. Perhaps they owe each other something, but whatever that may be, they should sort it out somewhere else and not in the Chamber.

Dr McCrea tried to analyse what Members were saying, and he said that there was a divide in the House. He said that the comments of those who call themselves Nationalists were, perhaps, understandable. He then turned his attention to this side of the House and addressed the comments that were made here. I am deeply offended by Mr McGimpsey's remarks. He appealed to the lowest common denominator. As Dr McCrea suggested, Mr McGimpsey should do the honourable thing and get to his feet to withdraw those scurrilous and tragic remarks. I will make way for him to do that. It is beyond contempt to try to make political capital from the Princess's death. I ask Mr McGimpsey whether he would like me to give way so that he can withdraw his remarks — his refusal speaks volumes.

12.15 pm

When I submitted the motion, Princess Margaret was alive. The Business Committee accepted the motion. Mr McGimpsey's party colleagues are here and can confirm that. If we had known or received any direction, we would have re-examined the situation. This House will know how to treat Mr McGimpsey for using that event in such a way. More importantly, the public will form its own opinion.

I did not table this motion to put anyone on the spot. There are plenty of ways and opportunities for politicians in this Chamber to put the Opposition on the spot. I was determined that I would not use this motion to do that. I care little whether it is Mr McGimpsey's Department, Mr McGuinness's Department or anyone else's Department that makes this provision. I want this House to ensure that a directive is given today to one of the Ministers so that schoolchildren will have the opportunity to pick up a simple memento that they can look back on in years to come and say that they received it in the Queen's Golden Jubilee year. If that is a political or offensive suggestion, it goes right over my head. I want to assure people that politics is not the driving force behind this motion.

I cannot accept Eileen Bell's amendment for one simple reason: the amendment seeks to put the onus on the boards of governors. That is not right. The provision should be made so that those who wish to do so may take it up. It is not going to be forced down anyone's throat.

Mr Ford: The Member said that the school should decide whether to take up this provision. Who is the competent authority in any school, if not the board of governors?

Mr Morrow: The amendment clearly says that this would be the decision solely of the board of governors. That is not right. Provision should be made available so that those who wish to take up this offer can do so. It should not be the case that each board of governors must go to the Department to say whether it wishes to take up this provision. The Department of Education or the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure should make the provision. The schools should know that it is available and how to take up the offer.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Does my hon Friend agree that parents should make the decision? They should have the right to choose. Why should a headmaster or a board of governors deny children the right to take up this provision, simply because they do not feel that it is politically correct? There is availability through the schools. Therefore, parents and children should avail of it, rather than let boards of governors make that decision for them. I have been a member of boards of governors for several years, and I believe that some on those boards would deny children the right to a souvenir. It is a decision for parents and their children.

Mr Morrow: I thank the Member for his exceptionally well-made point. No further comment on the matter is necessary.

Mrs E Bell: I did not say what Rev William McCrea claimed that I said. If a matter such as this is brought before a school's board of governors — and each board has at least two parent governors — the decision will not be taken at one meeting; it will be referred to the staff, pupils and parents.

Rev Dr William McCrea: No, it will not.

Mrs E Bell: Yes, it will. I have been in education for many years. It may be different in the South Eastern Education and Library Board, or on Mr McCrea's board, but that is what we do. We never make a decision without referring it to parents. That may be wrong in the Member's eyes, but that is the practice. Why does Maurice Morrow simply not say, "I do not want to accept the amendment"? I would rather he said that — it would be more honest.

Mr Morrow: I should like to comment on the Minister of Education's remarks on the expenditure of public funds. I note that he does not have the same inhibition about delivering funds for the Irish language. This side of the House has very little appetite for that. Therefore, his remarks hold little water. I also understand that other Departments spend considerable amounts of money on such things — they put it down to spending on culture. If they want to create a sectarian divide with this matter — and I have no desire to do that — then I ask them to acknowledge others' culture and aspirations.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 5; Noes 23

AYES

Eileen Bell, David Ford, Kieran McCarthy, Monica McWilliams, Jane Morrice.

NOES

Fraser Agnew, Paul Berry, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Boyd Douglas, Oliver Gibson, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Maurice Morrow, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 26; Noes 11

AYES

Fraser Agnew, Paul Berry, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Boyd Douglas, Oliver Gibson, David Hilditch, Derek Hussey, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Monica McWilliams, Jane Morrice, Maurice Morrow, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Sammy Wilson.

NOES

Michelle Gildernew, John Kelly, Alex Maskey, Barry McElduff, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Pat McNamee, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Dara O'Hagan, Sue Ramsey.

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education in this, Her Majesty's Golden Jubilee year, to ensure provision is made for each primary school pupil in Northern Ireland to be provided with a suitable souvenir to mark this important and historic occasion.

The sitting was suspended at 12.42 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClelland] in the Chair) —

‘PROTECTING CHILDREN, SUPPORTING PARENTS’ (2000)

2.00 pm

Dr Birnie: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to take note of the outcome of the consultation in England and Wales by the Department of Health on the law on the physical correction of children in their homes, ‘Protecting Children, Supporting Parents’ (2000), which decided not to change the legislation.

Why this motion at this time? The subject is a crucial and emotive one, although it must be said that attendance in the House at the moment might suggest otherwise. However, we know from wider debate on the issue that that is the case. During the debate, there will, no doubt, be tremendous unity on the need to prevent cruelty and abuse of children. That is an aim that we all share. However, there will be differences regarding what is in the long-term interests of children.

The basic motivation for the motion was provided by the Office of Law Reform’s public consultation, which was titled ‘Physical Punishment in the Home’. That document implied that the so-called reasonable chastisement defence, which allows, within limits, parents to smack their children, should be either totally removed or severely qualified. However, in November 2001, during the course of that period of public consultation, which finished a few weeks ago, the Department of Health in London completed its own parallel consultation and decision-making in the same field. It concluded that no legislative change was necessary. My motivation in moving the motion is to urge the Minister of Finance and Personnel to pay strong attention to the decision in London.

My first reason for commending the result of the consultation in London is that the local Office of Law Reform document does not seem to have been genuinely open to all the options. On page 1, the then Minister of Finance and Personnel writes that

“This paper does not take sides”.

That statement does not sit well with the subsequent comment on page 38 that

“We must change our law in some way”.

Page 52 is emphatic. It states that

“It is clear that the most obvious ways to mitigate the adverse impacts identified and to better promote equality of opportunity would be to remove the defence of reasonable chastisement from our law”.

If that is indeed the view of the former Minister of Finance and Personnel, what room is left for consultation that is open to all options, which should logically include the option of leaving the law unchanged?

A second reason to call for note to be taken of the decision of the Department of Health in London is that the use of research and statistical evidence in the Office of Law Reform paper further adds to the impression of a quest for a predetermined outcome. The document specifically asks for views on the evidence presented. Research in 1998 by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) showed that 88% of those surveyed across the United Kingdom viewed smacking as sometimes necessary. Contrast that with the survey quoted by the local consultation, in which only 34% were recorded as supporting “physical punishment”. In fact, the apparently low level of support in Northern Ireland may have been strongly determined by the way in which the question was worded — “physical punishment such as smacking or hitting”. To most people, hitting is much more violent than smacking, hence the much lower figure of support here.

As wide a range of scientific evidence as possible should be considered. In contrast, when on page 10 of the Office of Law Reform’s paper it claims to summarise the evidence on the effects of physical correction of children, it relied entirely, at least as far as the footnotes suggest, on just two academics, Dr Penelope Leach and Prof Christina Lyon.

It is not made clear that both those people have strong links to the lobby favouring the criminalisation of smacking. In 1993 Penelope Leach said:

“Social policy cannot always await rigorous research evidence”.

Moreover, their research has been strongly criticised by other academics. Prof Eysenck stated in 1993:

“Leach’s account is too one-sided to form the basis of responsible recommendations to law giving bodies”.

I also wonder why the document fails to register the research of other academics such as Dr Baumrind and Dr Larzelere. Dr Baumrind has written a review of the research evidence for the American journal ‘Paediatrics’. She concludes that a blanket injunction against physical punishment by parents is not scientifically supportable. A further review by Dr Larzelere and also published in ‘Paediatrics’ in 1996 found that out of 11 studies of parental discipline most — six — were found to have beneficial outcomes for children, one had a negative outcome and the remainder were neutral.

A further reason for following the Department of Health in London in retaining the reasonable chastisement defence in law is that the A versus the United Kingdom case at the European Court of Human Rights need not imply any further change in the law. That is a fundamental point. In spite of what the Office of Law Reform/

Department of Finance and Personnel document seems to imply, there is no imperative on the Administration in Northern Ireland, any more than its counterparts in London or Edinburgh, to allow a hard case to make bad law.

The 1998 *A* versus the United Kingdom case is a very peculiar and sad one. The boy known as "A" had allegedly threatened his brother with a knife, and he had also stolen something. His stepfather then beat him on several occasions with a garden cane. At the stepfather's trial at Lincoln Crown Court in 1994 the jury deemed that the stepfather was using moderate and reasonable punishment. Subsequently, the anti-smacking lobby group, end physical punishment of children (EPOCH), sponsored A's case in the European Court of Human Rights. The court found that A had been treated in an unacceptable manner under article 3 of the Convention on Human Rights. However, the European judges did not deliver any general pronouncement on the state of the law in England or the UK in this area. The Department of Health summary provided in 'Protecting Children, Supporting Parents' (2000), paragraph 4.5 states:

"The Court's decision was based on the facts of the case before it. The ruling applied to that case only".

There is, therefore, no need to amend existing laws. The laws on assault should have been enough to result in a conviction in the *A* case, and there is therefore no need to remove the longstanding defence of reasonable chastisement. Moreover, under the Human Rights Act 2000, all UK courts must now take into account judgements from Strasbourg, including the *A* case. The Office of Law Reform admits that this has already happened in the case of *Regina versus H* 2001. That court of appeal case, heard in April 2001, developed the common law for England and Wales to take account of the *A* case.

A further major point is that those who argue for an outright or partial ban on smacking may have misunderstood, or misused, section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 on equality of opportunity. The Office of Law Reform has a responsibility under section 75 to promote equality of opportunity with respect to age, among other things. As a public body it has that responsibility. The document seems to imply that that responsibility should be read across to the position of parents relative to children. Is that not a fundamental misreading of the purpose of section 75? It neglects the extent to which adults and children are, by definition, unequal in certain key respects.

It is therefore an absurd use of the law to argue that smacking equals inequality and that hence smacking is illegal. Children, unlike parents, are subject to reasonable chastisement. However, they also cannot buy alcohol or cigarettes under a certain age, and nor can they vote, drive or get married.

Mr McCartney: Not only are children prevented from doing a number of things, but they are also, by virtue of their age, protected by the law as it stands, in a way that adults are not.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Member for that valid point. Moreover, there is incoherence in the consultation document. On page 16 it seems to favour non-physical methods of correcting children, such as time out, grounding and withdrawal of treats. If it is to correct a child physically, then — with regard to section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 — in due course it will be argued that it is just as unequal and unlawful to correct them by non-physical means. The logic must apply if we start from the premise.

Most parents in Northern Ireland would be appalled at the prospect of legal change that could criminalise the use of moderate and reasonable chastisement. In moving this motion, I oppose the amendment in Ms Lewsley's name. In that respect, the Governments of Scotland and the Republic of Ireland have proposed bans on smacking, but they are not yet law. We will have to wait and see whether they move in that direction.

The document relied heavily on arguments drawn from human rights and equality, but what about the human rights of many parents who believe in a family ethos where moderate physical chastisement can be used in a loving manner? Of course, no one is defending violent abuse or bodily harm, but I want to defend the human rights of those families who wish to practise moderate physical chastisement. If the law is changed to ban smacking, some of us may have to make the difficult choice between following the law and following our consciences.

The Minister should pay heed to the decision taken by his counterparts in Westminster. As the Minister of State, Department of Health, Jacqui Smith, said on 8 November 2001:

"We do not believe that any further change in the law at this time would be appropriate — it would neither command widespread public support nor be capable of consistent enforcement".

Those points, which are made in the case of England and Wales, apply with equal strength to Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received one amendment to the motion, which is published on the Marshalled List.

Ms Lewsley: I beg to move the following amendment: In line 3, delete all after "Department of Health" and insert

"and also of international practices including those in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, in relation to the law on the physical correction of children in their homes".

I ask the House to support the amendment. It is essential that we identify and analyse models of best practice, current thinking and research in many other

jurisdictions, not just England and Wales. We have to consider the development of best practice in line with international standards. The protection of children is of paramount importance in our society, and the issues around the physical punishment of a child have provoked an interesting and wide-ranging debate.

Children should be entitled to the same protection in law as adults. Domestic violence is still a common occurrence here, and witnessing this type of behaviour in the home has a devastating and detrimental effect on children as it can increase violent, aggressive and anti-social behaviour in young people and adults.

In order to best meet the needs of children, we should all approach this issue with a genuine, open mind. That is the duty of the Minister and the Executive. In its consultation paper on physical punishment, the Northern Ireland Office of Law Reform maintains that children require effective discipline and agrees that care and effective discipline will equip them to take their place as mature members of the community.

It is in that context that the issue must be addressed. As Dr Birnie said, the Office of Law Reform is engaged in an open consultation exercise, and the outcome is not predetermined. It is vital that experiences in other countries are taken into account.

2.15 pm

With regard to discipline, parents' discretion is exercised in a framework of legal rules. Any parent who fails to meet a child's basic needs or mistreats a child can be tried in a criminal court. Although the law already regulates the issue of physical punishment, the established legal standard is problematic. Currently parents are allowed to use chastisement only in a reasonable and moderate manner. Changing the legislation is not enough to change society's attitudes to parenting and the physical punishment of children.

Increasing knowledge of child development and psychology suggests that effective discipline should aim to stop unacceptable behaviour in the long term and short term by showing children an acceptable alternative way to behave. Effective discipline should help children to take responsibility for their behaviour and to internalise moral values.

In a recent report on physical punishment, the British Medical Association concluded:

"We believe that physical punishment is inefficient, ineffective and harmful in modifying children's behaviour and that parents should be encouraged and assisted in developing other methods of child discipline."

Court action will not bring Northern Ireland law into compliance with the Government's full range of human rights obligations, nor with the equality obligations of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. A decision must be made on whether the current law should be abolished

or incorporated into a more general statement about families' rights and responsibilities.

A statement of rights and responsibilities could be constructed to include the responsibilities of both children and parents, similar to that formulated in Austrian law, which was used to declare an end to physical punishment. That statement could be aspirational. Instead of banning physical punishment, the statement could say that parents should aim at not using physical punishment. It could be part of civil law rather than criminal law and be designed to help parents and children know where they stand under the law. A primary duty of the Northern Ireland Government is to promote equality of opportunity between people on the issue of physical punishment. Accordingly, due regard must be given to how to mitigate any equality impact and to how to promote equality of opportunity when dealing with a physical punishment policy.

Save the Children, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and over 100 other organisations in the UK have campaigned actively for a ban on physical punishment. Both the NSPCC and Save the Children are founding members of the Children Are Unbeatable! programme, a UK-wide campaign to end physical punishment of children. The NSPCC contends that

"the only sensible option in Northern Ireland that is consistent with the civil law on child protection, human rights and equality legislation is to legislate to remove the common-law defence of reasonable chastisement".

If the defence of reasonable chastisement were removed, children would be in the same legal position as adults with regard to the law on assault. Advice and information for all parents, not only those who experience problems, is important. Any help and support for parents, whether they are having a difficult time or not, can only be good. The aim should be to establish a system that will not only provide adequate protection for the most vulnerable in society from those who seek to cause them harm but also to respect parental rights.

A fundamental aspect of all relationships is to keep lines of communication open. We can all relate to parents' statements such as "I do not know what to do with him/her. He/she will not listen to me." There are very few parents who have not said those words in some form or another. We cannot afford to give up and to stop communicating with young people. They may appear not to be listening, but often they have taken in our words and simply do not want to admit it. Respect and empathy should be shown to children, and corporal punishment is a contradiction of those values.

Funding is essential to support parents and, in addition to creating programmes to deal with problems after they develop, to introduce preventative measures.

After all, prevention is better than cure. I therefore put the amendment before the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has allocated one and a half hours for the debate. For that reason, and to ensure that the smaller parties have an opportunity to speak, I must limit Members' speeches to five minutes.

Mr Gibson: Parents from all over Northern Ireland have spoken to me about the issue. I point out to the Minister that loving, caring parents want their normality to continue. I speak on behalf of those who have enjoyed parenthood, who have love and affection for their children, and who have a sincere wish to bring up their family according to the precepts, norms and principles of their beliefs, philosophical or otherwise.

I warn parents in Northern Ireland that if they allow the legislation to be passed without challenge, they will be assuming that there is a nanny state — in other words, the state knows best; the state takes control, and the state controls parenting and its methodology. I ask parents to write to the Minister to convey their concerns. I want all those who are concerned about the matter to ensure that the Minister is aware that raising a family involves love and affection and the wish for one's children to grow up to be good citizens. That is the norm.

We are being told to control a tiny minority, the abnormal few who do not respect the rights of parenthood. We have a right to protect the family unit. It has always been the basic unit of society. We must give parents that right and privilege. I remind the Minister and those who support the current legislation that, according to the penultimate sentence in article 2 of protocol No 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the state shall not act contrary to the philosophic beliefs and wishes of parents. Therefore the concept of respect for parents and the family unit is embodied in European law.

I ask that that right be respected in our legislation. It would be wrong of any legislature to assume that, because some parents are irresponsible, it can impose a general prohibition on the norm. I appeal to the Minister to take note of a heartfelt lobby. Perhaps it is not the most vociferous lobby, but it is composed of people who want their human rights and beliefs to be respected. Let us do more than just take note. It is important to support Dr Birnie's contentions, which he so eloquently outlined together with the various academic arguments on the issue.

I appeal from the point of view of common sense. Ulster parents have always had great respect and support for the family, so to support the normal, good parents, who do their best for their children and who want to continue doing so — without having to look over their shoulders to see what the nanny state

dictates — it is important that Members show clearly that we support the rights of the family.

Ms Ramsey: I want to record my disappointment that the Business Committee has allowed each Member just five minutes. There is clearly a great deal of interest in the debate — both in the Chamber and outside it.

I support the motion and the amendment. The motion is only calling for the Minister to take note of the outcome of the consultation process in England and Wales even though it was decided not to change the legislation there. I support Ms Lewsley's amendment, because I think that she is right: the House should call upon the Minister to take note of the consultation that is taking place throughout the world and not just that which was carried out in England. We should not try to reinvent the wheel. There is plenty to take note of.

The Assembly must be careful not to pre-empt the outcome of the consultation, put a barrier against the outcome, or restrict the work of the Committee for Finance and Personnel or the Minister on that outcome. If there is to be consultation, the Assembly has a duty to allow the people who are being consulted the right to give their views. Local issues require local consultation, and the consultation exercise on this has raised several points from both the pro and anti sides in recent weeks. The Assembly must support parents, but it must also protect children.

'Children Are Unbeatable!' is a group that has undertaken much research on this. It has produced a briefing paper, which says that

"At the moment, 'Children Are Unbeatable!' believes that children are not equally protected under the law and deserve better support from society".

I do not believe that any Member would object to that. I am concerned that Dr Birnie does not support the amendment. I am unsure of his reasons. The model that has been proposed in Scotland, which Members were briefed on, shows that

"A 'middle' position has emerged which includes a ban on all physical punishment of children under the age of three and the use of implements on all other children."

I am, therefore, concerned about the basis on which Dr Birnie is rejecting the amendment.

Many parents feel uneasy at present about what they see on television and in the media, and the Assembly must take that on board. There are concerns that many good parents will be victimised by this. The 'Children Are Unbeatable!' briefing paper states that

"If the law were changed, parents should not have to worry about trivial prosecutions. Safeguards should be put into place to ensure that the new law is able to serve its key purpose — to protect children from physical violence rather than to penalise parents".

The people who are working on that consultation exercise are also aware of the issues.

Regarding the substance of the motion, I do not think the Assembly should allow anything to pre-empt the outcome of any consultation exercise or restrict Committees. All Members sit on Committees and are, therefore, aware that they get lobbied — rightly or wrongly — about many matters. The Committees have time to take that on board and to analyse, scrutinise, and ask for advice.

2.30 pm

One of the Committees that I sit on sent the Office of Law Reform correspondence back and forth until it was satisfied with a number of Bills. While I hope that Dr Birnie is not trying to pre-empt or stop any consultation exercise, he is unwilling to take on board the model or consultation exercise that has happened. That is why I support Ms Lewsley's amendment.

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I understand that, when the timetable was made, it was not expected that we would be as far ahead of schedule as we currently are. This debate has been scheduled to last only for an hour and a half. With the leave of the House, perhaps we could extend the time for approximately 45 minutes. That would give all those who wish to speak on this important issue an opportunity to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Poots, you are well aware that your party sends a Whip to the Business Committee, which sets the time limits for debates. It is then my duty to allocate time fairly to all parties. Your Whips should inform the Business Committee of your dissatisfaction about the limited amount of time being given to such a debate.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The extension to the debate is proposed with the leave of the House. Surely, if it is with the leave of the House, that would mean that all Members are happy with the time being extended. Why should any time restriction be imposed? Mr Poots suggested that we seek the leave of the House to extend the debate by 45 minutes to allow a wide range of Members to speak. Surely that should be put to the vote?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The simplest method is for the Whips of each party to make it clear that adequate time should be allocated to debates.

Mr Weir: But surely — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am on my feet, Mr Weir.

Extending the debate by leave of the House would mean that only one Member would have to say "No" for the proposed extension to fall. It is something that continually arises and must be dealt with, but it is for the Business Committee to deal with.

Mr McCartney: You make the point that the feelings of the House should be referred back to the Business Committee, Mr Deputy Speaker. Most Members will agree that this must be the fifth or sixth time that this feeling of the House — that the time allowed for important debates of public interest is being severely restricted — has been aired. Apparently, there has been no improvement whatever. Mr Poots made the point that the time is currently available, as other business was more expeditiously dealt with than was anticipated. Why not, with the leave of the House, use that time? If one Member objects, then we do not have the leave of the House. If every Member agrees, then we do.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCartney, you are reflecting what I have said on several occasions in the Chair. Time and time again, the Business Committee has limited the amount of time for a debate. I am then forced into finding time for smaller parties, such as your own, to speak. The difficulty with these points of order is that we are eating into the time for the debate. However, I will put it to the House.

Mr Gibson: We are ahead of schedule by an hour and a half. This is an important motion, to which an amendment has been tabled. As such, it is reasonable to extend the time in order to have a thorough discussion. Can I persuade you, as Deputy Speaker, to put it to the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members do I have leave of the House to extend the time for this debate to allow all those who wish to contribute to do so?

[Members indicated assent.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: The time will be extended.

Ms Lewsley: The two Members who spoke after me had their time limited. In fairness, those who are left to speak should have equal time, otherwise one person is getting more time than another.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You raise a valid point, which I will take on board.

Mr Ford: I will attempt to be brief in the time I may be allowed.

Like other Members, I was a little surprised that this motion was put before the House today. The motion simply calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to take note of one aspect of consultation on the matter of children's discipline that is being conducted in England. I have no doubt that, whatever criticisms I might make of him in other areas, the Minister of Finance and Personnel is aware of the English consultation and is capable of reading the outcome of that report. In the terms in which the motion is phrased, it does not particularly add much to the process that we are currently undergoing.

In that respect at least, Patricia Lewsley's amendment adds something to it, since it creates a greater degree of balance by referring to the consultations in Scotland and the Republic, rather than merely to those in England and Wales. The amendment, therefore, has considerable merit. In any case, while the motion as originally put down was not particularly meaningful, I would not have wanted to vote against it.

There is no doubt that Scotland and the Republic of Ireland have taken significantly different directions to those taken in England and Wales, though their decisions have not been finalised. Given that the Unionists in this Chamber always tell us of their affinity with the Scots, they seem less willing to listen to the Scots than to the English. No doubt Nationalists will consider that they are being consistent by listening to what happens at this stage south of the border.

The Scots have taken a rather more balanced approach in their considerations than the English have, particularly in the matters of protection for children under three and the use of instruments for administering corporal punishment. If we are not moving towards a total ban, those areas should be considered. Perhaps we should move further in the direction of an outright ban. There is an issue of proportion in how we address the matter and in how we deal with the genuine concerns of loving parents who consider that their past methods might make them criminals.

In Northern Ireland we must refer particularly to the issue of obligations under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I was a little surprised at the suggestion made by Dr Esmond Birnie as proposer of the motion that adults are not exactly equal to children and therefore do not really matter under section 75. That is not my interpretation of section 75, and I do not accept that there is a case for adults' doing anything they like with children just because they are not exactly equal. Clearly the rights under article 3 of the European Convention are at issue, and I was surprised when Mr McCartney intervened and referred to children being protected by virtue of their age. That also suggested that children might be damaged by virtue of their age in a way that would not apply to adults.

Dr Birnie talked about defending the rights of families who wished to use moderate physical chastisement. Would anyone in this Chamber use that phrase in relation to any kind of adult? How can it possibly be suggested that such language is appropriate in respect of children if it cannot be used about adults? We must examine appropriate mechanisms to encourage discipline.

Dr Birnie: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: Briefly, given my time limit.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Member for giving way, and I will be brief. Does he not accept that there are cases

in which it is legitimate to treat children differently from parents?

Mr Ford: Clearly there are, and I thank Dr Birnie for bringing me to my next point. As part of the balanced Scottish approach, for example, I notice that the Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000 specifically bans corporal punishment but states that

"corporal punishment shall not be taken to be given to a pupil by virtue of anything done for reasons which include averting ... an immediate danger of personal injury or ... danger to property."

Clearly there are cases where the proverbial tap on the back of the hand is appropriate, but we must be very careful that we do not appear to give the impression of a *carte blanche* for serious physical abuse. We have seen plenty of that in this society, and we must be careful not to approve anything which extends to any parent an understanding that such behaviour is acceptable. In this debate there is a danger of talking as if discipline is solely physical punishment. Other methods of discipline might not at times appeal to harassed, tired parents but might be more creative and beneficial to children in the long term.

It is certainly no part of my case to make criminals of loving parents who react in a particular way at a particular time. It is clear that we must look to a balance in those matters. Rather than suggest that we should automatically espouse the English system, we should seek to encourage more appropriate discipline, and thereby more appropriate behaviour by children.

Mr Ervine: I did not intend to speak on this issue, but there are issues on which my constituents will require clarification. Are we saying that we want to retain the capacity to beat our children? Dr Birnie used either the word "slap" or the word "smack".

Dr Birnie: I used the word "smack".

Mr Ervine: What is the definition of a smack? I would like to know the weight of a smack and the velocity of the movement of the arm. What is the difference between a proper smack and an improper smack?

Members' comments seem to involve an element of "Don't do as I do, do as I say". In other words, our children should be taught not to use violence in the hope that they will not use violence as adults. Of course, the people who teach them not to use violence use violence themselves. That is a fact.

Parents will do what they want to do in the confines of their home. There may be precious little that we can do about that. However, we, as legislators, should create an ethos and send out the message that the use of violence is unacceptable. It is as simple as that. I would like Members to share that opinion with me. Certain Members have wanted me to share those views with them for a long time. I want Members to

share those views with every citizen of our society, including those who cannot speak for themselves and those who, when they do speak for themselves, are not listened to.

We cannot assess the parental skills and talents of Members, but their skills and talents as legislators are pretty evident. We have choices to make. We may not cure the ills of our society in one day, one week or one month, but we can lay down markers and an ethos. We can do that with our children before they get the opportunity to become, perhaps, polluted by the society that we live in.

It seems that there are circumstances in which, if a slap on the wrist were required, Mr Deputy Speaker, you would be more than welcome to tell an adult that he or she is about to get one, rather than have the adult tell the child that. I think that you get my message, Mr Deputy Speaker. It would seem that there are as many unruly adults as there are unruly children. There are those who are the grand democrats, who want to be listened to and fawned over but who will not listen to others. That is known as "Do as I say, not as I do".

2.45 pm

Regardless of the history of our society and the ages that we may be, we can all cast our minds back and decide whether physical punishment in the home was a good idea. In relation to our capacity to withstand physical punishment, the red welts will go away. However, I am talking about a person's state of mind, and the belief that it is OK to smack. Regardless of the scale of the punishment, and how it is dressed up, if it is OK to smack to engender authority, it follows that violence is OK. Even if minimal violence is involved, that is exactly what you are saying. Nothing will redress that — violence is violence is violence is violence. It is as simple as that.

Dr Birnie: Given the logic of the Member's argument, perhaps he will tell the House whether he is an absolute pacifist. Does he not accept that there can be cases of the legitimate use of force, such as by the police, the armed forces or the state?

Mr Ervine: As an adult, I must react to the world that I live in. For a child, I wish that there were someone who would try to make it a better world. They used to put kids up chimneys. Children — *[Interruption]*.

Dr Birnie: That is not relevant.

Mr Ervine: It is relevant. Our society is changing — all societies, even if they are badly managed, are changing. Irrespective of how bad our society is because of the way the adults function in it, we should try to make it better for our children. The issues on the agenda should be: do not teach a child how to hit; do not teach a child how to be a bully; and do not show a

child that violence of any form, no matter how minimal, is OK.

Ms McWilliams: Mr Ervine's last point related to changing societies. Lest there be laughter in the House about the fact that certain things were once acceptable, but became unacceptable, I will tell Members about what was once acceptable — and what was said in the courts about what was acceptable — when it came to hitting a person. Hitting then, of course, became known as abuse. It was once acceptable to hit a woman with a stick that was no thicker than a person's thumb, hence the phrase, "rule of thumb". That was where the ecclesiastical courts started their rulings. They declared that it was perfectly acceptable to hit a woman in the house, providing that it was not too damaging. Women, rightly, started to ask what was considered damaging and what could be construed as emotional or physical abuse. Therefore the law began to change. The victims rose up and said that people would no longer decide by those laws what they could tolerate. A great deal of law was made on the basis of victims responding to what was considered to be acceptable.

The Office of Law Reform's consultation has not chosen a position. The matter has been left open for consultation and I have no doubt that the Minister will respond. The Office of Law Reform deliberately kept the consultation process open to facilitate a healthy debate.

Patricia Lewsley's amendment is welcome. Some Members may agree with what the Scottish Parliament has done, but I disagree. When we start to split children up into age groups of 0-3 years, 3 years and above, et cetera, we are getting into difficult territory. Let us in this devolved Assembly form our own views and advise the Minister on the civil law. We are not discussing criminal law, because the Office of Law Reform has responsibility only for civil law. As we debate this matter, let us remember that Northern Ireland is still the only place in Europe that tolerates corporal punishment in independent schools. That is a piece of legislation that we should move to change immediately. In tabling the motion, Esmond Birnie is getting ahead of himself. It might have been best to wait until the Committee had reported to the Assembly on the current consultation process.

I agree with other Members who question what constitutes moderate physical force. Let me tell Esmond Birnie and Oliver Gibson that it is not a matter of a nanny state making decisions. The debate on seat belts was the same. The car was considered to be a private place and it was thought that, once inside a car, people should be allowed to do what they wished for the sake of their own safety. It was up to the individual to decide whether he or she would wear a seat belt. However, the law and the state took a different view, saying that such decisions had consequences for young children

and that it was not the right of a parent to decide whether the child would wear a seat belt. The law and the state took that decision.

If people do not wear seat belts and accidents occur, there are consequences for the Health Service and social services. The same situation will arise as regards hitting children. The decision has consequences for psychiatric services, counselling services and social services. The state does make decisions on what happens in private places. Having undertaken much research over the years, I assure the House that private places are the most unsafe. People who are known to their victims carry out most of the violence in our society.

Dr Birnie: Will the Member give way?

Ms McWilliams: I have approximately 80 seconds remaining. I would give way, had I more time.

I remind the House that this is a positive step forward and that the consultation is useful. To allow people to make their own decisions on the matter is unacceptable, ineffective and costs the state resources.

I support the amendment.

Mr McCartney: Mr Deputy Speaker —

Mr Ervine: Rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: One of the Members has difficulty with his digestion. We have heard some rumblings already in his address to the Assembly.

I oppose the amendment and support Dr Birnie's motion. In an erudite, logical and objective speech, he indicated all the relevant parameters of the debate. I can speak with a degree of authority, because I am the father of four children and the grandfather of six, two of whom I take on holiday for three weeks every year. Therefore, I am in close contact not only with my own children but also with my grandchildren. The difficulty lies in distinguishing between child abuse — in whatever form — and correction or reasonable chastisement of a child in a loving and caring environment, when that chastisement or correction is offered not to endanger the child, but to protect him or her.

If a child clambers up on the parapet of a high-rise flat, introduces a piece of paper into an electric fire, or runs out into traffic, it may be necessary to correct that child's behaviour instantly, not because anyone wants to abuse or to inflict cruelty on that child, but rather to teach, protect and make him or her alert to the dangers of this world. The world is a dangerous place, and a criticism of the nanny state and the excessively caring parent is that by not exposing children to risk and danger, or to an apprehension of danger, or to the correction of danger, in a natural environment, they

may place the child in greater danger. That has been the subject of all sorts of psychological investigations.

The law as it presently stands protects children from abuse or cruelty, although much of the abuse and cruelty that goes on is undetected by organisations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and social workers, who apparently are engaged to protect them. There is the example of the NSPCC in the case of the Climbie child, and countless other examples of children who have been systematically abused, and who have been systematically supervised by social workers and the NSPCC, which fails them entirely.

In many cases, therefore, the real, secret abuse will continue to escape detection. When it is detected, the abuser will be subject to prosecution under the existing laws that protect children as they protect everyone from cruelty, harm or assault. That blanket imposition on parental control would mean that a mother who is alarmed when her child dashes onto the road and who pulls the child back, giving it an instant smack on the leg, may well be reported to the local authority by a neighbour or a happy voyeur, and may be prosecuted. There is a suggestion that an individual may be given six months' imprisonment or a period of counselling by some parenting group. That is absolute nonsense. As Esmond Birnie pointed out, the European Court of Human Rights did not —

Ms McWilliams: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: No, I will not give way. You have had your time, and you did not give way. The European Court of Human Rights has clearly pointed out that a specific case, where a boy was beaten on the legs with a garden cane, involved a breach of human rights. However, the court did not make any judgement on the principle of law that operates in the United Kingdom which states that a parent may not abuse or be cruel to his or her child, but may exercise reasonable chastisement for the purpose of protecting that child, because they love and cherish the child and wish to protect him or her from future dangers that might cause pain or suffering. It would be a great wrong to remove that right from a parent.

Mr Weir: I support the motion and oppose the amendment. Henry Ford once said that you could have any colour of car you wanted, as long as it was black. Having read the consultation paper from the Office of Law Reform, it seems that you can do anything about the law as long as it is changed. That is the option that is open to us, as the proposer of the motion noted. The status quo is the one thing that is not acceptable, because a range of five different options has been put forward.

I appreciate that consultation continues. For unusual reasons, there was not a great deal of publicity when

the consultation was launched. Its launch was scheduled for 11 September, but other events overtook it. As the mover of the amendment probably said, there have been many lobby groups and forms of consultation. However, many people who have contacted me to express their concern do not feel that they have been empowered and consulted.

The voices of ordinary parents have not been listened to in this debate. The proposals bear symptoms of a wider malaise in society. The liberal elite appears to be introducing a raft of supposed rights and other proposals that are either ludicrous or repugnant to many right-thinking people. That liberal elite seems to sneer at anything that purports to relate to family values or the family unit, and that is the background against which the motion is examined.

There are several reasons why we should argue that the current law is adequate. Any proposed change discriminates, in particular, against parents of a certain moral disposition based on strong Christian values. A large lobby of people believe that they have a right to apply a certain level of discipline to their children as part of their Christian faith. Any changes to the current law would discriminate against them.

It has been indicated that any change would hit the wrong target. For example, unfortunately, at one end of the scale, many parents seem to neglect their children, let them run wild and do not seem to exercise any discipline. I am sure that all of us have received complaints from constituents whose lives have been made a misery by petty vandals and young children who create nuisance. However, any change in the law relating to reasonable chastisement would not affect those parents.

At the other end of the scale, the current law does not permit the physical abuse of children. Parents who physically abuse children, beat them up or attack them, are dealt with by the law. The review does not intend to deal more severely or adequately with those people. It will target parents who take a loving and disciplined attitude to their children. Those people will suffer as a result of any change in the law. Therefore, it is wrongly directed.

As regards state interference, the state has a right and a duty to protect the vulnerable in society against extreme behaviour. However, there is a fundamental difference between that and the enforcement of a particular theory of parenting, which is clearly intended in this instance. It is a facile argument to compare the reasonable chastisement of a child to the use of car seat belts based on the fact that if seat belts are not used, the child might be killed. We are not comparing like with like. If that theory were accepted, where would it reach its logical conclusion? For example, do we impose dietary conditions with which to bring up

children? That would create a police state or nanny state, and it would take the role of the state too far. It would diminish people's respect for the law, because it would create a law that people would find ludicrous, and which might not be enforceable. That would distract people's attention from the important issues of child protection — the use of resources to protect children who are physically abused.

It is worthy to support the motion, because proposals to change the law as outlined by the Office of Law Reform would result in political correctness gone mad. Let us ensure that parents have a choice as to how they bring up their children, within certain restrictions. I call on everyone to support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. It gives parents, myself included, insight into other aspects of life. We all bring our children up in a world full of hope and promise, and we all believe that we act as our parents have done. However, we sometimes have to chastise our children, and a slap across the back of the legs is one way of doing that.

3.00 pm

That does not mean that we love our children any less. Chastisement is sometimes needed.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Babies grow up, and we must educate them about right and wrong. That means that we praise the good behaviour, but we also acknowledge the bad behaviour and punish it. I found that out more so with my three boys. I sometimes wondered why I was smacked as a child, and I realised with my children that there was a reason for it. It was not out of anger, but to protect the children. It was out of love and a fear that they would continue to do wrong in the future. That was the guiding light for many of us. Smacking as a reprimand was not always carried out, but the knowledge that my parents would smack as a last resort was enough to enforce upon me that there were social rules that had to be obeyed.

It is disappointing that some Members here today cannot acknowledge the need for some control within a household on smacking children. Some Members seem to believe that there should be no smacking at all. They believe it to be cruel and unnecessary. That is hard to understand when we have representatives of a party here who tell teenagers to appear at Connolly House for reprimand and retribution. It does not look good: they are against smacking but are crying out for much more severe punishment.

Eighty per cent of parents in the United Kingdom said that they would use some form of physical punishment. The Government and the Assembly would be penalising the vast majority who take parenting responsibly. Many children are now fully aware of

their rights and use those to their advantage. How many times have we heard of teachers being assaulted in schools and then being prosecuted because they tried to restrain the individual who was trying to cause them injury? We should acknowledge that.

In London, a teacher was kicked in the stomach by a student when she was four months pregnant, and she lost her baby. The student was never prosecuted for the offence, but the teacher was victimised even more by the students on her return to work. She was again assaulted when she became pregnant for a second time. This was in the press at the time. Teachers cannot even ask a student to go to the headmaster's office — a place where I found myself perhaps more than I should have — because that would be picking on him and violating his human rights.

Minimal and appropriate physical punishment is necessary when bringing up children, and a lack of any form of punishment in society directly corresponds with the rocketing rise in crime and vandalism that we are seeing today. That has already been mentioned by other Members. It is necessary to inform children that bad, and sometimes dangerous, behaviour is never appropriate and will be punished.

One of the arguments against smacking is that it does not work. It does. I will give the example of one of my children. He was told not to do something, but he kept on doing it. He was approaching a fire, and there was a danger that he could be burnt. I told him to draw back, and he did not. I reached out, not in anger, but to protect him, to bring him back, and I smacked him. My son learnt that the fire was dangerous, but I also saved him from serious injury. That is a small thing, but it is a way in which a parent interacts with his children and ensures that they are protected. That is important. It is a small but effective measure.

Physical punishment is appropriate, because children do not know what is best for them. That is a parent's responsibility. That is what we are always trying to do. To those who say that smacking is wrong, I ask how they can reason with a five-year-old who is hell-bent on scribbling on a wall with felt-tip pens or beating the brains out of his younger brother? There has been no leeway —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. There is a conversation going on.

Mr Shannon: It is my own Colleagues.

There has been no leeway in this report to support those parents who choose to smack if that is the way in which they want to parent their children. As a parent, I felt that it was, and is, the way to punish my children after reasoning has failed. It is not the Government's place to tell me how to bring up my children, just as

the Government should not choose my wife, my job or how many children I have.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Shannon: My democratic right to choose my life and my morals and to guide my children as I see fit should, and must, be safeguarded.

Mr Poots: This is a very interesting debate, and I welcome the fact that most Members will have the opportunity to participate. The role of the family is crucially important, and we do ill to interfere too closely with it.

Parents have a special relationship with their children. Having children was a special experience for my wife and myself. There was a bonding experience that allowed us to express our love, and allowed us to care for our children, and for our children to express their love to us. The vast majority of parents have the same relationship with their children. It is a loving and caring relationship where parents want the best for their children. They also want to give them the best opportunity and guide them in the right direction.

It is remarkable that 88% of parents have, at one stage or another, used smacking as a means of giving their children direction. The vast majority of those 88% did that in love and care, because they wished to give their children the right guidance.

Some Members may think it somewhat odd that I was such a keen supporter of the children's ombudsman, and yet I supported smacking in the home. Throughout the process of the report that the Committee of the Centre drew up on a children's ombudsman, I had said that 95% of the work of the ombudsman would relate to 5% of children. Children are being neglected and abused, not by parents smacking them, but by parents who are ignoring them and allowing them to run wild and do as they please in many circumstances. Those children unwittingly stray into danger.

In my constituency, large numbers of young people meet up regularly. Residents in the vicinity are harassed, objects are thrown at their houses and their own children are abused by those young people. Girls as young as 12 and 13 are mixing with young fellows of 18 and 19 years of age, where drink, drugs and glue are readily available. Are those parents caring for their children? Should those parents be charged with neglect of their children? I believe that parents who neglect their children and allow them to run wild do much more harm to their upbringing than those who will occasionally smack their children to bring them into line.

Some of the articles that I have read about smacking and other forms of punishment stretch to the ridiculous. Giving children stars for good behaviour may work with very young children, but once they get a little older they may look upon that with disdain. Another form of punishment is to send children to their rooms for a

time. If smacking amounts to physical punishment, then those other methods equate to mental punishment, and that must be considered objectively.

Since corporal punishment has been excluded from schools, many teachers have said that they have no way of controlling children. Children can do what they like, and teachers can do nothing with them. If that has happened in our schools over the short time since corporal punishment has been removed, what will happen in our homes when children are allowed to do as they please, when they please, where they please, and parents can no longer bring them back into line?

Smacking is one form of punishment that can be used on children. I had to punish my son this morning, and I did that by removing his mobile phone for a week. I could have chosen to smack him, but I believed that removing his phone was another method of punishment. Parents have a range of options, and those who are disciplining their children should not be punished. Those parents who are neglecting their children and allowing them to run wild should be punished.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren):

Although I welcome the debate, I approached it with a degree of apprehension. I anticipated that, although the motion is directed at the nature of the consultation process, much of the debate would slip into assumptions about the outcome of that consultation process at a phase when the public consultation has been completed and an analysis of all of the submissions has just begun.

Therefore there has been no determination at this point on the outcome. As has become clear from the debate, many other jurisdictions, including all the United Kingdom jurisdictions, have been consulting on the question of how we most effectively bring discipline and guidance into the lives of our children, and what role the law should play. It is not a case of the law's not having a role to play; it has a role to play in many aspects of family life. Suggestions that it should have no role at all simply ignore the considerable volume of family law that necessarily exists.

In England and Wales the consultation was through the document 'Protecting Children, Supporting Parents', published in 2000. That consultation received 900 responses, 80 of which were from Wales. Five hundred and sixty of the responses were from individuals. Analysis of the consultation showed that although nearly all the organisations that responded favoured a change in the law, 70% of those individuals who replied were in favour of maintaining the status quo. In November 2001, the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Jacqui Smith MP, communicated the Government's decision on the way forward. She said that the Government would not be legislating on the issue.

It is important to note that, whereas the decision was taken not to legislate for the time being, Members

will be aware from now on that that did not mean that there was no change in the law in England and Wales. The Court of Appeal, between the consultation and the Government's decision, had occasion to adapt the law in the case of the Crown versus H. The Court added to the existing common law on reasonable chastisement those tests set out by the European Court of Human Rights in *A versus the United Kingdom*. Judges and juries in England must consider the nature and context of the defendant's behaviour, the duration of the behaviour, the physical and mental consequences of the behaviour for the child, and the age and personal characteristics of the child. The Court of Appeal also added a fifth factor, namely, the reasons given by the defendant for administering the punishment.

The Minister finished her statement by saying that the law on reasonable chastisement in England and Wales would be kept under review. It is, therefore, possible that the matter will be raised again in England and Wales at a later stage. Let me assure the Member — because this is the point of his motion — that I shall take careful account of the outcome of the English consultation exercise just as I, and, indeed my predecessor, have taken into our consideration the decisions reached on the law on the physical punishment of children in other jurisdictions.

The Scottish result may be very different from that of England and Wales. A Bill is being introduced by the Scottish Parliament, which, if passed, will prohibit the physical punishment of a child under three years of age. It will forbid the use of any implement, such as a cane or slipper, and will make it illegal to shake a child or hit him or her on the head. The Bill, if passed, will also make it illegal for childminders in childcare centres to use physical punishment.

The Republic of Ireland has also reviewed policy on the physical punishment of children and has decided that it will follow a policy aim of ending parental physical punishment through education. The Law Reform Commission of Ireland has said that it believes that this may, in due course, facilitate a change in the law, although it would be premature to change the law there now.

3.15 pm

I should also refer to the experience of other countries. Sweden, Finland, Austria, Italy and Israel are among those countries that have ceased physical punishment, while Canada and almost all US states take the view that physical punishment is an exception to the law of assault. Therefore it was important to conduct a thorough consultation exercise in Northern Ireland so that a decision on the right model for Northern Ireland could be reached through the collection of comprehensive information on people's views. The

consultation document was not launched on 11 December, Mr Weir; it was launched on 11 September.

Mr Weir: I said that it was launched on 11 September, and that was why, unfortunately, it did not get the publicity that it deserved.

Dr Farren: It received considerable publicity. I may have misheard the Member with respect to the date. The press was widely circulated, and the Minister launched the document at a press conference —*[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr Farren: Doctors, dentists and surgeries were all provided with copies of the consultation document, as were churches, libraries and schools. Evidence that attention has been paid to the document and that the consultation process has been a success in reaching all sections of society is to be found in the 500-plus submissions that have been received. It is vital that the Executive hear the range of views so that we can find an appropriate way forward.

The process of analysing the responses has begun, and it will be a substantial task. I am making a commitment to publish the analysis. My Colleagues and I enter the process of examining options for the way forward with genuinely open minds. We shall have to do something, because the Westminster Government have undertaken to the European Court of Human Rights that the failure of the law to provide adequate protection to those in the position of A will be addressed and the law amended. However, all the options set out in the consultation paper remain: limiting the scope of the defence of reasonable chastisement; removing the defence of reasonable chastisement, including a statement of rights and responsibilities in the legal definition of parental responsibility; and encouraging the development of parenting programmes. Those options remain, and there may be more.

I welcome the contributions to the consultation exercise from all shades of opinion, including those contributions from Assembly Members. They are difficult issues that invoke strong feelings in many people, and the consultation exercise was the means by which those feelings could be communicated to those charged with deciding the way forward. The responses must be tailored to the circumstances of people in Northern Ireland.

I shall turn to some of the individual matters raised by Members. The nature of the Strasbourg jurisprudence, which was questioned in some contributions, means that although the court can look only at the case before it, its decisions will have wider ramifications. In A versus UK, the United Kingdom accepted that the law did not provide adequate protection to the applicant against maltreatment or punishment, contrary to article

3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Therefore it should be amended.

In moving the motion, Dr Birnie suggested that the research on which the consultation paper is based is flawed. Experienced lawyers and academics wrote the paper, and all efforts were made to check the facts contained in the paper. Dr Baumrind and Dr Larzelere are two leading sources that have been mentioned as not having been considered adequately. Dr Baumrind was considered during the preparation of the paper. Dr Larzelere's work was written when the research for the paper was completed, but it has kindly been provided to officials who will give it proper consideration.

Dr Birnie: My understanding is that Dr Larzelere's research was published in 1996, well before the consultation in 2001.

Dr Farren: I understand that the paper and research, which the Member refers to, was made available only after the consultation document was prepared. Nonetheless, it has been made available to officials, and the evidence in it will be considered in the course of the analysis of submissions to the consultation.

Reference has also been made to an alleged misuse, or misapplication, of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Section 75 provides for equality of opportunity in respect of age. Every consultation in Northern Ireland must refer to equality obligations, and equality impact assessments must be carried out in relation to policy decisions. Currently, the law creates differences between how children and adults are treated in the law as regards assault and battery. There is no defence of reasonable chastisement for an adult who hits another adult. Therefore it is our job to see whether that distinction, as regards children, is justifiable. That is one of the purposes of the consultation; it does not predetermine the outcome.

I reassure the Member that the outcome of the consultation carried out in England and Wales has been, and will continue to be, noted by my Department and by the Executive. Equally, we will take into account the experience in other jurisdictions. Work will be carried out to analyse the responses to the consultation, and any policy that is developed will properly take into account the views expressed by those who responded to the questions posed by the consultation paper.

As the debate has demonstrated, this is no easy topic. We have to keep in mind the three-year-old who is given a quick smack for going too close to the fire and the 12-year-old who is hit with a broom handle or worse, as evidenced by the use of baseball bats and cricket bats in our society. We must keep in mind chastisement of that kind, which is being given to teenagers for answering back or perhaps for not answering at all.

This is not a referendum for or against smacking; it is much more complex than that. We have to focus on the functions of the law in defining standards. It is about protecting vulnerable people, including children who can be exposed to considerable mental and physical risk not just outside the home but also within it, and helping to shape people's ideas about what is acceptable and unacceptable. It is not about classifying people into good and bad parents. Some good parents say that they have frightened themselves by smacking too hard. It is about asking some difficult questions and recognising that we are dealing with laws that are 150 years old.

It is because of the value of informed debate on these important issues that I am happy to support the amendment in the name of Patricia Lewsley, as it emphasises the many sources on which we want to draw. Indeed, we have been doing just that in deciding the way forward. Parents, interested groups and all of us want what is best for our children and to bring them up to be responsible and active members of the community. I thank the Member for raising these vital matters in the debate, and I thank the Members who have contributed to it.

Ms Lewsley: I thank those who have contributed to the debate and especially those who supported my amendment.

The debate is not about good parents or bad parents; nor is it about penalising any parent. It is about putting guidelines, legislation and, in particular, support mechanisms in place to help parents. I am surprised by Mr Weir's complaint about the lack of consultation with parents and his support for a motion that narrows the issue by asking the Minister to take into consideration only the outcome of the consultation in England and Wales to the exclusion of other jurisdictions. The ultimate aim of the consultation should be the protection of our children.

Dr Birnie: I thank all those who took part, particularly the Minister.

The underlying argument in proposing the motion is simple and modest. It is that the Minister should note the decision made by the Administration in London, which was taken during the process of public consultation here, that no further change in the law is necessary. England and Wales face the same European Court of Human Rights obligations as we do, and the European Convention on Human Rights has already recognised that the European Court of Human Rights does not imply that all signatory countries must have an outright ban on smacking.

I sense that many opponents of the motion fear that if Northern Ireland, or any other part of the UK, retains the so-called "reasonable chastisement" defence, it will make them the odd man out internationally.

Despite the implication contained in the consultation document, there is, in practice, great uncertainty as to whether major European countries such as Austria and Italy have truly banned smacking in the home.

The opponents of the motion should also be aware of the example of the state of Arkansas in the USA. You may say —

Ms Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Dr Birnie: I will not give way as I have only a short time. The former President of the USA, Bill Clinton, who was a welcome visitor here, was Governor of Arkansas, where the statutes allow for reasonable and moderate parental discipline.

Ms McWilliams: They also allow for capital punishment.

Dr Birnie: I do not think that we want to debate that issue today.

I will be brief. Ms Lewsley referred to the need to encourage effective parenthood, and we all agree with that. I pay tribute to those portions of the consultation document that point the way to greater forms of support for parents. I have doubts about Ms Lewsley's proposal for changes in the civil law.

I agree with Mr Gibson's points. Many of us have received letters from parents who are concerned about proposed changes in the law, and we should avoid punishing the innocent majority of parents along with a small minority. We should avoid a nanny state.

Ms Ramsey said that we should look at the example of other countries, and I agree with that. However, it is important to examine those examples carefully to check whether they actually have banned smacking.

As to the point that changes in the law would not lead to trivial prosecutions, we should bear in mind that a court case has been taken in Scotland because of an incident in October last year when a French tourist smacked his eight-year-old son on the streets of Edinburgh.

Mr Ford said that we should not give carte blanche for serious abuse. We all agree with that. There is an existing law on assault.

Mr Ervine challenged proponents of the motion to define smacking.

3.30 pm

An acceptable definition could be established by the five criteria that are now set out in the development of the English common law, established by the R versus H case in the spring of last year, to which the Minister referred.

Prof McWilliams said that the consultation was an open process. However, as Mr Weir said, the option of

keeping the law as it is was not listed among the options for public consultation. As to the impact of physical correction on children, I refer Prof McWilliams to the research that I mentioned in my opening speech. I agree with Mr McCartney that, in all probability, a change in the law would not prevent the sort of insidious, secret abuse that is so damaging and wrong.

I agree with Mr Weir that we must listen to the concerns of ordinary parents. I also agree with Mr Shannon's and Mr Poots's remarks about the importance of having a loving family without excessive state intervention.

I note that the Minister said it is too early to analyse the results of the consultation. We eagerly await the analysis of the more than 500 submissions that the Office of Law Reform received. As I said, he listed the five criteria that were established after the United Kingdom versus A and the R versus H cases in order to inform courts about the definition of reasonable chastisement in future. That is where our law should rest.

Finally, I urge the Minister of Finance and Personnel to note that the 'Protecting Children, Supporting Parents' consultation document said that

"it would be quite unacceptable to outlaw all physical punishment of a child by a parent".

Prime Minister Tony Blair was quoted in 'The Guardian' of 8 November 2001 conceding that he had smacked his children when they were

"really naughty or did something nasty to another child."

That is one example that we should bear in mind.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 30; Noes 34

AYES

Alex Attwood, Eileen Bell, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, John Dallat, Mark Durkan, David Ervine, Sean Farren, John Fee, David Ford, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Carmel Hanna, Joe Hendron, Billy Hutchinson, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Kieran McCarthy, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Monica McWilliams, Conor Murphy, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, John Tierney.

NOES

Fraser Agnew, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Esmond Birnie, Wilson Clyde, Robert Coulter, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Nigel Dodds, Sam Foster, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, William Hay, David Hilditch, Derek Hussey, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, Iris

Robinson, Ken Robinson, Mark Robinson, Jim Shannon, David Trimble, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Jim Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to take note of the outcome of the consultation in England and Wales by the Department of Health on the law on the physical correction of children in their homes 'Protecting Children, Supporting Parents' (2000) which decided not to change the legislation.

Mr B Hutchinson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Members should resume their seats.

Mr B Hutchinson: My point of order relates to the extension of the debate that has just ended by the Deputy Speaker who was in the Chair before you. There is no provision for such an extension, either in Standing Orders, which I checked, or in the legislation. Can the Speaker make a ruling on this matter and bring it before the House on Monday?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I will certainly refer that point of order to the Speaker for him to look at and report back.

3.45 pm

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — *[Madam Deputy Speaker.]*

JOB LOSSES IN EAST ANTRIM

Mr Beggs: I thank the Business Committee for allowing me to bring this matter to the Floor of the Assembly. It is important to highlight the recent decline in employment in east Antrim to other Assembly Members and to the various Government Departments. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Will Members please take their seats.

Mr Beggs: There is a clear need for Government Departments to assess how the job prospects and lifelong learning opportunities of the people of east Antrim can be improved.

Many people's perceptions of east Antrim are inaccurate and have more in common with the situation in the 1960s, rather than with the reality of the twenty-first century. GEC, ICI and Courtaulds have gone. The voids left by those multinational companies have been filled by FG Wilson (Engineering) Ltd and by small business complexes which have developed on the former sites of ICI at Kilroot and of Courtaulds at Carrickfergus. During the past decade, in common with the rest of Northern Ireland, unemployment declined with the emergence of new industry and service sector jobs in east Antrim. In 1996, unemployment in Larne was at 10%, slightly above the Northern Ireland average of 9.5%.

In recent years the economic outlook for east Antrim has been primarily related to the fortunes of Nortel Networks. In 1999-2000 over £125 million was earmarked for investment in Nortel's Monkstown plant. In 2000 Nortel won the Northern Ireland Exporter of the Year award, and its workforce almost doubled. A range of suppliers flourished in east Antrim at that time — Insilco, Solectron and C-Mac.

New jobs were created, but with the crash of the global telecommunications market those were either lost or were at risk. Since January 2001 there have been 1,000 redundancies at Nortel, and 200 staff have been given early retirement. There have been 350 redundancies at Solectron, 200 at C-Mac and 120 at Insilco. Other job losses in the electronics industry were related to the decline in the world economy. Two hundred jobs were lost at Daewoo Electronics in Carrickfergus, and 65 at AVX in Larne. With the announcement of other redundancies, the total of jobs lost in the last year affected approximately 2,000 people.

Questioned by David Hilditch, an Assembly Colleague from East Antrim, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment reported that 44% of all redundancies in Northern Ireland between April and November 2001 were in east Antrim. That statistic is startling. The scale of job losses is the same as that caused by the closure of the man-made fibres industry in the

early 1980s. The trade union Amicus-AEEU indicated that a 2.5 ratio multiplier effect comes into being when manufacturing jobs are lost, because the additional loss of service sector jobs increases the total.

The unemployment statistics for December 2001 show that unemployment in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area is at 6.6%. That is the fifth highest of any council area in Northern Ireland. Larne borough, at 5.9%, is the sixth highest, with the Northern Ireland average at 4.6%. That is the position at the moment, and recently announced redundancies have yet to appear in official unemployment statistics.

Eleven district councils in Northern Ireland are earmarked for special TSN support from LEDU and IDB. I want to know why those eleven councils qualify, while the councils with the fifth- and sixth-highest unemployment rates — Larne and Carrickfergus — do not. I welcome the fact that the criteria for designating TSN are under review, but I would like the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and the Executive, to bear in mind that dramatic changes have occurred in east Antrim, even since the recent completion of the Noble indices.

The IDB's most recent report shows low numbers of overseas visits to east Antrim. In 2000-01, there were no visits to Larne, and only three to Carrickfergus. How can we address the decline? How do we make progress? How can we contribute to improving the lot of the people of east Antrim?

There is a need to promote sustainable employment, and to switch the focus to indigenous business start-ups and company development, which is the role of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Invest Northern Ireland.

Education also plays a role in improving people's opportunities. I place a high level of importance on the need for education, to enable an individual to improve his or her skills. The availability of training and further education is key to improving the employment potential of individuals, the economic performances of employers and the economy as a whole: hence the wording of the motion.

The East Antrim Institute of Further and Higher Education, for which I have the highest regard, is not located in east Antrim; it is located in north Belfast. East Antrim is one of the few constituencies in Northern Ireland that does not have a permanent, central further education college. As a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I have repeatedly raised the issue of further education provision in my constituency, as the former Minister will testify.

There is underprovision. Larne Technical College closed in 1999. It has since been demolished, and the site is derelict. Larne's current further education provision

is situated in a temporary, out-of-town location. There is a real need to re-establish further education facilities in Larne town centre to give a focal point to continuing lifelong learning. I hope that the Minister will soon be in a position to announce good news on that front. I am pleased that she has agreed to meet me next week to discuss this and other related issues. The meeting was arranged prior to the selection of this motion for debate.

There are several areas in which there have been educational gaps in east Antrim, particularly under Peace I funding. Proteus (NI) Ltd spent a total budget, largely in the field of educational support, of £22.25 million, none of which was spent in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area. The educational guidance service for adults (EGSA), with a budget of about £4.3 million, spent only £26,000 in the East Antrim constituency, on one pilot project.

I welcome the fact that Proteus (NI) Ltd and EGSA recently attended a community-funding event in east Antrim. Applications will rise as a result of that. However, as east Antrim has a relatively weak community infrastructure, there may be a need for proactive departmental support in that area.

The Oakfield Community Centre in Carrickfergus is a potential outreach area for the East Antrim Institute of Further and Higher Education. It has been successful to date, but demand is dropping because its equipment is obsolete. I seek proactive support from the Department for Employment and Learning to improve the educational facilities in that deprived area of my constituency.

Many villages, never mind towns, in Northern Ireland were provided with community educational IT suites through Peace I. However, to the best of my knowledge, the town of Carrickfergus, which does not have a further education college, was not. The officials responsible for the allocation of Peace II money recently advised me that it is unlikely that funding will be available within their gift. Again, will the Minister say whether there are departmental or other funds to provide Carrickfergus with a community education facility so that lifelong learning programmes can be provided?

I expected learndirect, the Internet-based learning facility, to play a key role in filling the further-education voids in east Antrim. Until recently, Larne and Carrickfergus were two of only four district council areas in Northern Ireland that did not have a learndirect centre to provide community access. I welcome the recent announcement of a learndirect centre in Carrickfergus, which is to be operated by Oriel Training. However, I regret the fact that no learndirect application of the required quality has yet been approved for Larne. I suggest to the Minister that a new further education campus in Larne would be an ideal location for a learndirect centre. The community that I represent

is becoming frustrated by the delays and the lack of equality in the provision of lifelong learning facilities.

I support the development of small business units. There has been a successful development at the Larne Enterprise Development Company (LEDCOM) and at Carrickfergus Enterprise Agency Ltd (CEAL), in Carrickfergus, where business start-ups have been encouraged — all the units there are filled. In my constituency there is an opportunity to further develop indigenous employment that would continue to exist despite changes in the world economy. I ask the Department for Employment and Learning and other Departments to support such developments.

The people of east Antrim need equal education opportunities as regards the provision of further education and training. A level playing field is required to provide incentives for businesses across the board in Northern Ireland. The fortunes of the global economy are not in the hands of the Assembly, but let us ensure that equal opportunities for training, education and employment are provided for everyone in Northern Ireland, including east Antrim.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Many Members wish to speak in this debate. Therefore I ask Members to limit the length of their contributions to around six minutes.

Mr O'Connor: I thank my fellow Assembly Member for East Antrim, Mr Beggs, for bringing this important issue to the House. There has long been a perception that east Antrim is prosperous because of companies such as GEC, Standard, Courtaulds, ICI plc and Carreras Rothmans (NI) Ltd. Those companies have gone. They were replaced by companies such as Daewoo, which is more or less gone; Insilco Technologies, which has only two remaining employees; and C-MAC, Solectron, and AVX, which have also gone. There is a real danger that the entire constituency of East Antrim is placing all its eggs in two baskets: FG Wilsons and Nortel Networks Ltd. That is dangerous, as we have seen already this year. For example, my friend is today working the last day of his notice period at a subsidiary of Nortel. He is redundant from today.

East Antrim is now one of the unemployment black spots of Northern Ireland. When my Colleagues, Mr Beggs and Mr Roger Hutchinson, and I met the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment a few weeks ago, we discovered how bad the situation is. Long-term unemployment is increasing, and youth unemployment is actively rising. There may be a correlation between the rise in youth unemployment and the closure of the East Antrim Institute of Further and Higher Education in Larne. When that facility closed, all sorts of promises were made. We were told that a smaller, purpose-built, state-of-the-art building with IT suites would be built to meet the needs of modern education.

Those promises have not been delivered on, because the property has not yet been sold. I hope that progress will be made on the matter. I thank the Minister for her presence here today, and I know that she is sympathetic to our concerns and is trying to ensure that all people in Northern Ireland have equal access to training.

4.00 pm

Further education in Larne was asset-stripped by the East Antrim Institute of Further and Higher Education. More and more courses were removed from the institute in Larne to safeguard the institute in Newtownabbey until full-time further and higher education provision could no longer be justified in Larne. However, hundreds of people made use of part-time provision, and that service is no longer available.

I want to touch on some other issues that have affected my constituency. The Moyle interconnector is now on stream, and there is a combined gas turbine plant at Ballylumford, where there will be a huge number of job losses once that is fully operational. There have been job losses at Kilroot power station in the past few years. East Antrim seems to have fallen behind; as prosperity has increased elsewhere in Northern Ireland, it seems to have decreased in east Antrim.

There is also hidden unemployment. Mr Beggs referred to figures that we received from the Minister. However, because many of the jobs that were lost in companies such as AVX and Insilco Technologies provided second incomes for families, and because those losses occurred in the run-up to Christmas, perhaps they have not yet appeared in the raw statistics. I fear that the statistics are much worse than we are being led to believe.

I would like the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to appoint officials to examine seriously the situation in east Antrim. There is no longer a hospital in the constituency; a minor injuries unit was promised, but there has been no word of it. The people of east Antrim have been stripped of everything that they had, and they cannot take much more. Not enough is being done to meet their needs.

There is talk about building the capacity of our young people and helping them be the best that they can be in order to compete in the modern world. I agree, but how can that be done when people in Carnlough have to travel almost 40 miles to reach the East Antrim Institute?

The tourism industry has been faltering, and much more should be done to improve it. The Industrial Research and Technology Unit should become more involved in trying to safeguard and add value to the assembly jobs at FG Wilson.

Mr Hilditch: I support what the previous Members have said, and I once again voice my concern at the job losses and the lack of training opportunities in the constituency of East Antrim.

After the last round of job losses at Nortel in May 2001, I wrote to the company and subsequently met their representatives on 12 June 2001. The agenda of the meeting was the long-term future of Nortel and the group of satellite companies that was set up to supply directly to Nortel. The company representative assured me that job losses had been unavoidable, but that the company was now leaner and fitter and that the market had bottomed out. Nortel was simply waiting for the upturn that research predicted would happen. It could not be stated at that stage when that upturn would occur, but Nortel was confident that no more job losses would occur at the company or at its suppliers, including Solectron. Disappointingly, as an elected representative, that was the last I ever heard from Nortel.

I then had a series of meetings with the satellite companies, including Solectron. At this stage I was concerned that Solectron had a contract with Nortel as the sole customer, and that people who had applied for jobs at Nortel ended up employed at Solectron. I have continued to be concerned at the state of this industry, in which Nortel appears to be the central figure. Indeed, I have submitted written questions on this subject, to which Mr Beggs referred earlier. The answer was that 1,218 people were unemployed up to 9 November, but I believe this figure to be less than half of the jobs that have really been lost. The figure does not take into account those on temporary or fixed-term contracts, and those who lost their employment before finishing their training, therefore not attracting redundancy.

I must add that many of these employees were in secure employment elsewhere, and were encouraged to leave and move to Nortel and Solectron on the promise of secure employment, increased earnings, overtime, and better working conditions. This is why the workforce is so embittered about not only the loss of its employment, but the way in which the bad news has been handled. For example, documentation was left accidentally in photocopiers: output increased at the Solectron factory; employees were sent to other factories in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland to help them achieve the quality that the Carrickfergus factory achieved every day. Currently the contract Solectron has with Nortel is worth some £45 million, and I believe that this will be relocated to the aforementioned factories. Therefore this loss will be not only to Carrickfergus and east Antrim, but to Northern Ireland as a whole.

With regard to redundancy packages for the workforce, the reality is that because Solectron is such a new company in the Province, the redundancy package is of little use to most of the employees. I urge the Minister to ensure that every effort is made in training

and employment to ensure that the very capable workforce is offered every opportunity for training and upgrading of its skills and technical know-how, so that its prospects for new employment are fully maximised, and that these workers are simply not put out to graze as surplus to requirement.

Another area for concern in my constituency is the gas turbine installation in the Premier Power plant at Ballylumford. The contract has been awarded to an Italian company, which in turn has recruited a workforce of foreign nationals. I am informed that the skills required are readily available in our locality. I am concerned that the workforce may not be receiving the minimum wage, despite its entitlement as members of the European Union. I have brought this to the attention of the Assembly through question AQW 965/01. The answer from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment was as follows:

“My Department does not hold this information which relates to issues outside its remit and to a private company. Nationals of countries outside the European Union and the European Economic Area require an employment permit to work in Northern Ireland. Responsibility for the issue of employment permits rests with my colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning. The National Minimum Wage is a reserved matter, on which the Department of Trade and Industry leads for the United Kingdom as a whole.”

Further questions have been tabled, and are due for answer this week by the Minister for Employment and Learning — we look forward to those. I am disappointed with that answer, and empathise with the local people who have experienced unemployment in the east Antrim area, and who see foreign nationals taking much-needed jobs and shipping home the wages.

In conclusion, I am deeply concerned at the state of the telecommunications industry in east Antrim, on which the area is heavily dependent. I can draw parallels with the textile industry, whose demise devastated the area during the 1970s. We can ill afford to lose the telecommunications industry, but similarly I am concerned at the over-dependence on this industry. East Antrim also depends on small businesses, as some 58.4% of employment in Carrickfergus and Larne is accounted for by small businesses, many of which are experiencing difficulties. East Antrim currently ranks fifth among the 18 parliamentary constituencies in unemployment figures, and urgent measures need to be put in place to reverse that trend. I support the call to improve job prospects and lifelong learning opportunities.

Mr Ford: I rise to look over the constituency boundary from South Antrim to East Antrim, as I want to add a few brief comments to the debate on the Nortel aspect, particularly on behalf of my Colleague, Mr Neeson. I welcome the fact that this debate is taking place, and I congratulate Mr Beggs for having introduced the topic.

There is a significant problem in east Antrim. Companies such as Nortel did not just employ constituents

of East Antrim Members; they also employed many people from south Antrim and north Belfast. As David Hilditch has rightly highlighted, the shrinking of 1,500 jobs in IT and communications in the last year or so was in parallel to what happened in the late 1970s and early 1980s to the textile jobs, which also disappeared from south and east Antrim. A major initiative is needed to restore confidence in the area and deal with the after-effects of the job losses at Solelectron in recent weeks.

There has also been some good news. The recent announcement by the planners to give outline planning permission to the retail and business park at the Courtaulds factory site in Carrick is a positive development on a brownfield site and is clearly welcome. However, we must ensure that that is followed up fully. I trust that the Minister for Employment and Learning will ask her Colleague, Reg Empey, to ensure that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment lends as much support as possible to that project, so that there are more jobs for the people of Carrickfergus.

Similarly, there are some positive signs of recovery of IT jobs in north America. We hope that the Minister can give us some assurance that everything possible will be done to stop job losses in Northern Ireland and to ensure that jobs are underpinned until they become fully viable and firms can expand again after the anticipated upswing in the economy when it comes across the Atlantic from north America.

Invest Northern Ireland will have a major role in developing and promoting investment. The over-dependency on IT and communications jobs has been highlighted, and there is a need to build up the tourist potential, but basically the economic base in the constituency and in the wider County Antrim area must be broadened. That clearly comes back to the Minister for Employment and Learning, because one fundamental matter must be addressed — skills development and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities.

The Government must support private business, because private business is the engine that produces economic growth in an area. However, competition does not always achieve what we want, and the changes made to further education several years ago seem to have created difficulties. The amalgamation of separate colleges seems to have led indirectly to problems in several areas, most obviously in the closure of the Larne campus of the East Antrim Institute.

It must be possible to redress that. Danny O'Connor has rightly highlighted that it has not been dealt with as speedily as it should have been. Whatever problems there may be in running a multi-campus institution, it cannot be right that the people of Larne have no further education provision closer than Ballymena, Antrim or Whiteabbey. Something must be done to put

further education provision back in Larne, and we must also look for some form of outreach in Carrickfergus instead of depending entirely on the facility in Whiteabbey. Those matters must be addressed urgently.

Economic confidence in east Antrim, which has had high employment levels and has lost them, is lower than in some parts of Northern Ireland that have always expected to have higher levels of unemployment. Larne is clearly an area of major concern, although Carrickfergus is not far behind, and when I say Larne, I mean the entire borough from Ballycarry to Carnlough.

Sean Neeson wrote recently to several Ministers to seek a co-ordinated interdepartmental approach to the situation and to ask that a task force be set up to ensure that the problems do not fall through the gaps between different departmental responsibilities. Those problems simply cannot be dealt with in isolation, and I ask the Minister for Employment and Learning to tell us what she can do, in conjunction with her Colleagues, to ensure that a multi-agency task force, involving not only Government Departments but also local agencies in Larne and its wider community, is put together to ensure that we tackle the problem in a way that shows that this institution is supposed to symbolise joined-up Government.

Mr K Robinson: I must point out that east Antrim contains three boroughs — Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey. They are both independent and interdependent. What affects one part affects them all.

4.15 pm

That is true in the current economic climate, especially in the aftermath of September 11.

A catalogue of job losses has removed thousands of positions from our economy over the last year: Nortel Networks and Bombardier Shorts in Newtownabbey; Fort James UK Ltd; AVX and Insilico Technologies (UK) Ltd in Larne; and most recently Solectron and C-MAC Network Systems Inc in Carrickfergus. Countless other small firms have either closed their doors or savagely reduced the numbers of their workers.

Unfortunately, east Antrim has been down this road before. In the 1960s and 1970s, almost one quarter of the man-made fibre industry of the United Kingdom was located in that area. Names such as Courtaulds, ICI and the tobacco firm Carreras appeared on the wage packets of many homes in the three boroughs. A change in global economic terms led to a disastrous period of closure for those firms. The blow to the economy in local terms was manifest in the virtual stagnation of commercial life in those towns. Shops that depended on the spending power of these workers closed, thus adding hundreds more to the unemployment registers.

With the terrorist campaign in full flow, the intervening years brought a certain unexpected respite to the

economic life of the area. Many residents found part-time or full-time posts in the security forces and the Prison Service, with the Carreras site eventually housing the RUC stores. Today, with the present, imperfect peace process, there has been a substantial loss of these security-related jobs. That is a hidden factor in the job problem in east Antrim.

Since the region had a particularly high concentration and percentage of these sources of employment, this has in many ways created a double whammy for my constituents in East Antrim. Are our towns once again to suffer the commercial downturn that afflicted them in the 1970s? There is perhaps one vital difference today. In the 1970s, the direct rule regime was not particularly sympathetic, and was disinclined to intervene in east Antrim for political, as much as economic, reasons. Today we have once again a local Administration that can reflect the concerns of our constituents. Just as it was a local Administration that first attracted the man-made fibre and tobacco industry into east Antrim, the current, restored Administration is in a position to actively pursue inward investment. It is also in a position to work with large companies to minimise the current unemployment downturn and ensure that these companies and their workforce are well positioned to benefit from the inevitable upturn.

In this era of joined-up government, I appeal to the Ministers — particularly the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment — to set up a task force, comprising the six MLAs, representatives from the borough councils and business/commercial life and the Minister's officials to see how existing links, for instance via twin towns and sister cities, might be profitably exploited. Perhaps a trade mission focused solely on the needs of east Antrim could be put in motion. I am sure that the local enterprise development agencies in each of the boroughs can contribute their expertise in the creation of small and medium enterprises to ensure that the economy does not put all its eggs in one basket again.

When the current survey into the location of Civil Service jobs is complete, the Minister of Finance and Personnel will have an opportunity to ensure that a significant number of those jobs are located in Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey. Those towns currently have 0.6%, 0.5% and 0.3% of the total Civil Service jobs in Northern Ireland, which is an absolute scandal. Those stable jobs would help to sustain that critical mass of the economically active residents which these towns require during this period of industrial readjustment.

The Minister of the Environment also has a role to play by ensuring that the outstanding natural beauty and resources are enhanced and not destroyed by endless, thoughtless and, in many cases, tasteless development, so that the tourist and recreational potential of the area can be fully exploited.

The Minister for Employment and Learning also has a vital role. One strong nucleus in the area that can attract employees and employers is the strong higher and further education base provided by the East Antrim Institute of Further and Higher Education, currently based in Newtownabbey. That base could be considerably strengthened if the Larne campus were speedily developed to its full potential to provide a focal point for the upgrading of the skills of that local workforce, thus enhancing their prospects and the prospects of the town in attracting inward investment.

The Jordanstown campus provides a strong research and development base, which has been useful in the task of spinning out new enterprises, particularly in the high-tech and biomedical field. It is currently the centre for training for the hospitality and tourist industry. I hope that the University of Ulster will be encouraged to develop that expertise at the Jordanstown site given its high standing and its proximity to many tourist attractions and hotels in the area.

The Minister for Regional Development has a crucial role to play by ensuring that the trans-European network route linking Larne to the rest of the system is not reduced beyond Whitehead, and that the A2 beyond Greenisland towards Carrickfergus is urgently upgraded, so that businesses in Carrickfergus can more readily access and exit their industrial units.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr K Robinson: The Minister for Social Development needs to address the serious problems facing parts of the towns of Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey, where once thriving local shopping areas are being painted over to improve their appearance. It is a cosmetic exercise that is merely masking the fact that the commercial heart is being squeezed out of those towns.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr K Robinson: I am drawing my remarks to a close.

We are addressing an urgent problem today with job losses running into thousands. Commercial life is in need of a confidence boost, and if the House supports the people of east Antrim, east Antrim will eventually support the economy of Northern Ireland.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr K Robinson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Several times in the House, when we have come to very important points, speeches have had to be squeezed into six minutes. It is totally ridiculous, especially given the seriousness of this situation. It has happened in debates on education and in others. I draw it to your attention.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member knows that according to Standing Orders the Adjournment debate is only permitted to last one hour. Many Members are interested in participating in the debate and in order to give the Minister time to respond it is important that we restrict the timing.

Mr R Hutchinson: I, along with my Colleagues, support Mr Beggs's motion, although I wonder what benefit it will be as we have already met many of the people concerned in the Assembly and the Executive. We have written to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. We also met Sir Reg Empey and put exactly the same points to him that we are putting today. I wonder how seriously those in authority view the situation in east Antrim.

I remember the days when a boy left school in Larne, and it was just a formality to go into the BTH, as it then was, and take on an apprenticeship, or go down to the Pie, or the NSTC as it became. He could go to Ballylumford, or into the Bleach Green, the Morne, the paper mill, or down to Larne Harbour. Sadly, many of those outstanding businesses that have served Larne well over the years are no longer there.

I have to agree with what my Colleagues, Mr Beggs and Mr O'Connor, have said about east Antrim. People look at the area through rose-tinted glasses. They seem to think that east Antrim is made up of leafy lanes in Jordanstown, and that there is nothing beyond that. East Antrim consists not just of Jordanstown, but also of Greenisland, Carrickfergus, Larne, Carnlough and Glenarm. Many of those areas are in great deprivation.

East Antrim has suffered sectarian attacks over the past few months, especially in the Larne area. The whole of east Antrim has received very poor publicity in the media and throughout the world. When thinking of inward investment, I have to bear in mind the fact that people can only come to an area when they are encouraged to come.

I make no apology for asking the following questions. When it comes to focusing attention on east Antrim, where has the Industrial Development Board (IDB) been? Where has LEDU been in promoting east Antrim? What have those bodies been doing? What have they been saying? Why have there been so few visits? Why do we hear of jobs being created west of the Bann? Why do we hear of employers setting up business in Londonderry, Dungannon and other areas, while Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey suffer?

I sit on Newtownabbey Borough Council. At times, we are concerned with the Nortel set-up. We have Nortel at one end of the constituency and F. G. Wilson at the other. God forbid that anything should happen to those two companies, or east Antrim would be in desperate trouble. The Minister has kindly come along

today. However, I must ask her — where is our college in Larne? What is delaying the investment?

We have rightly heard that the East Antrim Institute is not sited in east Antrim. It is in north Belfast. Why are the people of Larne and the surrounding area penalised through there being so little further education provision in the town? We know that youth unemployment has increased. Is that because they are not encouraged to pursue further education in Larne? I cannot answer the question. I do not know why it has taken so long for that particular development to take place.

Many people in east Antrim are trying. The six MLAs have been vigilant in seeking to bring new investment to the area. We have met together, we have met those in authority, we have met business people and we have asked the right questions. However, nothing seems to happen. I ask a simple question — why has east Antrim been neglected? It is unfair and something needs to be done. I call on those in authority to take east Antrim on board.

I totally agree with my Colleague Ken Robinson when he calls for a task force to be set up. Indeed, I have been calling for that for months. That is one issue that I put to Sir Reg Empey when we met him. A task force must be set up that is solely concerned with promoting east Antrim and with bringing jobs to the area before it is too late. I am pleased to support the motion.

Mr J Wilson: I recognise that the debate focuses on job losses in east Antrim. However, I am acutely aware that employment catchment areas do not recognise constituency or district council boundaries. Madam Deputy Speaker, I have taken your advice on my contribution to the debate and I shall do my best to adhere to the guidelines that you have set me. I thank you for permitting me to contribute to the debate.

The neighbouring constituency of South Antrim, which I represent, could be described as a gateway to the rest of the Province. Traffic that enters the port of Larne in east Antrim passes through south Antrim on its way to Belfast and to the west of the Province. Belfast International Airport is in the heart of my constituency, and the M2 motorway runs its full length. One could argue that an infrastructure and communications network would rubber-stamp south and east Antrim as an area of commercial attractiveness. However, the announcement in December 2001 by the Antrim textile company Norfil that it was to cease production with the loss of almost 200 jobs heralded a catalogue of job losses in the region. Since then we have had bad news from companies based in both constituencies. Although situated outside south Antrim, companies in east Antrim and other areas draw a large part of their workforce from the Antrim and Newtownabbey council areas. Although part of Newtownabbey is in east Antrim, most of the

town is situated in south Antrim, a point well made by my Colleague Ken Robinson.

Nortel is one such company, just over the constituency border in East Antrim. It boasts many South Antrim employees in its workforce — or rather, it did.

4.30 pm

The tragic events in the United States of America on 11 September dealt devastating and far-reaching blows to the aviation industry. Belfast International Airport, one of County Antrim's greatest strengths, suffered as a result. The withdrawal of the British Airways flights to Heathrow and the further announcement by Aer Lingus brought more bad news for jobs in south-east Antrim. Shorts is one of the Province's major players and an attractive employer for people residing in County Antrim. However, it felt the draught of the American tragedy. Fortunately, the initial prediction of 2,000 job losses has been reduced, and the final total has yet to be announced.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I advise the Member that he has taken some geographical licence. The guidance is that Members should confine their remarks to the subject areas indicated. I understand that you are making the link, Mr Wilson, but you must ensure that those links are constantly made.

Mr J Wilson: I will try to come back into line, Madam Deputy Speaker. We are witnessing a hangover from the years of direct rule when we did not have local politicians focusing on local issues. However, it would be wrong to be totally despondent. Since devolution, new jobs have been created in east Antrim. There is no doubt about that; it is not a matter for dispute. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Employment and Learning are pulling out all the stops to ensure that the Province continues to remain attractive and to come to the aid of those who have suffered losses in the region. I urge the Minister to use all her offices to do everything possible to speed up the process of retraining and re-employing those who have lost jobs in the region.

Mr O'Connor: Will the Member give way?

Mr J Wilson: I have finished.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): I thank Mr Beggs for giving me the opportunity to respond and to discuss some ways in which my Department approaches activities to address the impact of the recent job losses and the wider need to provide all our people with jobs and lifelong learning opportunities. Since the 1960s, east Antrim has had a reputation for being the centre of Northern Ireland's major industry. While things have changed considerably — Mr Beggs would probably say dramatically — it is vital that we maintain and build on what still exists

and keep those companies in Northern Ireland so that we are still positioned to take advantage of future opportunities. It is obvious that all the Members present have a genuine concern for their constituency, and that has been articulated very clearly in the debate.

Job losses have a devastating effect on everyone in a community, including other businesses, families and Members. Nobody escapes. Today it was County Antrim, with the closure of Dorma in Randalstown, and we can see exactly the effect of that. It saps morale and undermines confidence. There have been so many redundancies and job losses in east Antrim that I will be unable to mention them all, but I know that Solectron dealt a major blow to the area. The job losses are regrettable, but they are a result of the global downturn in the telecoms market. It was a commercial decision taken by the company. However, I am thankful that it still has a presence there, and it is essential that we keep it there. The IDB will work with Solectron to explore ways in which the local operation can, it is hoped, start to grow again. This will include developing relationships with the parent company to position Northern Ireland as a preferred site for other mobile projects within the corporation.

The IDB will continue to market the east Antrim area to potential investors. From April 1998 to date, there have been 75 first-time and 19 repeat visits to the area by potential investors. Although the Member may think that is not enough, it illustrates the ongoing contact between the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the local councils in east Antrim to understand their economic priorities and to work together in marketing the region to potential investors.

Although we are all aware of the current difficult market conditions and the severe downturn, particularly in the telecommunications market, Northern Ireland still retains a strong cluster of world-class telecoms companies. Those companies have not been immune to the impact of the market downturn, and the repercussions have hit hard in Northern Ireland, including in east Antrim. However, I believe that the availability of high-speed telecommunications will become more important than ever to businesses as new applications are developed and the level of e-business and e-commerce increases. We must press on in this area and ensure that, as a region, we are well placed to respond to the upturn in the market when it comes. The Government have a key role to play in the area to provide opportunities and hopes for the future.

I am very aware that east Antrim has suffered over the past months as a result of several major companies announcing redundancies and closures. Most of those companies had contracts with Nortel, and most of the redundancies have taken place since 11 September. My Department's main concern is to minimise, as far as possible, the impact of those redundancies on the

lives of the individuals who have been affected. The jobcentres work closely with the IDB, LEDU, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Social Security Agency and the relevant local companies to try to offer as full a range of services as possible to those who have been made redundant.

Professional advice on new career opportunities is available to everyone affected by the redundancies. This is provided by my Department's career officers, as well as by qualified staff from the Educational Guidance Service for Adults, with which we liaise closely. As part of that service they provide information and advice on job searching; curriculum vitae writing; local job vacancies; job vacancies further afield, including in the European Union countries; and training and other services available through New Deal.

Where appropriate, job clubs have been set up for employees to attend prior to the date of their redundancy. My staff maintain close working relationships with the Social Security Agency and, indeed, are co-located with that agency in Carrickfergus. That joined-up service enables us to have an integrated and holistic approach to our advisory and support service by incorporating advice on benefits issues.

In Larne our approach has been co-ordinated within the local enterprise agency, LEDCOM, which is being particularly proactive and is helping to co-ordinate a wide range of activities. It has helped to facilitate meetings between the relevant local companies and the appropriate agencies, including our jobcentre and social security staff, and it has proved to be effective. The Carrickfergus jobcentre manager is currently in the process of arranging meetings with the enterprise agency in the Carrickfergus area to discuss replicating that model there.

Other initiatives and services include the new Focus for Work provision that was introduced last October, which provides a range of measures to assist unemployed people back into work, and which has started well in the local area. There are also employment review interviews, which are voluntary interviews for jobseeker clients approaching their thirteenth week of unemployment to discuss work goals and the steps taken to achieve them. We have the job clubs, which aim to provide job search skills for unemployed people, including those under notice of redundancy or who are returning to the labour market. They provide individually tailored technical, procedural and personal assistance and support aimed at helping jobseekers to identify and obtain employment opportunities.

In Carrickfergus the job club provider is Enterprise Ulster, and in Larne it is JTM Training and Employment. In December it held a job club for those being made redundant at AVX, and they will have a further session in March. Training for Work is a new vocational

training programme aimed at assisting clients with an identified training need to improve their chances of getting a job. A key objective is to help the client develop and maintain positive work attitudes in a programme lasting for up to 26 weeks.

Enterprise Ulster has been piloting a programme across Northern Ireland since last September. WorkTrack is particularly suitable for those who need to establish a work history. There is also the Bridge to Employment programme, which aims to provide customised training courses to equip the unemployed, including the long-term unemployed, with skills to enable them to compete for new job opportunities. Members all know about New Deal, the major element of the Government's welfare to work strategy, which gives unemployed people a chance to develop their potential, gain skills and the experience to find work.

It is depressing that all the jobs are gone, and we are discussing remedial action, but this is what we have to do to get back to our previous position.

On the wider issue of education, training and lifelong learning provision, my Department supports a range of provisions in the east Antrim area. I will advise the Assembly of the activities in place and under development in the further education sector.

The central aims of further education in Northern Ireland relate directly to the subject of our debate: supporting economic development and widening access to, and increasing participation in, further education and training. Another aim is to improve quality and raise standards. These aims are the bedrock of the Department's lifelong learning strategy, which reflects the Executive's focus on economic development and social inclusion.

As the largest provider of vocational education and training in Northern Ireland, the further education sector is ideally placed to respond effectively to these challenges. In 1999-2000, the latest year for which figures on full-time enrolment are available, the further education sector had over 120,000 vocational and almost 70,000 non-vocational enrolments. The college closest to east Antrim is the East Antrim Institute of Further and Higher Education; in 1999-2000 it had 6,700 vocational and 3,690 non-vocational enrolments. I visited the East Antrim Institute recently. These totals include enrolments from the institute's current campus provision in Larne and its outreach provision in Carrickfergus.

In recent years the institute has widened access to further education and increased participation by individuals who, for whatever reason, had not previously taken advantage of the opportunities available. The institute has also maintained a clear focus on the economic needs of Northern Ireland. It has seen a 31% increase in enrolments in the six areas of skills need identified

as important to the development of Northern Ireland's economy.

The East Antrim Institute has demonstrated particular strengths in information and communication technology training and is one of only three centres in Ireland approved to run the Cisco certified network professional qualification programme. The other two centres are in Dublin and Cork. The institute also offers one of the current pilot foundation degrees in telecommunications in conjunction with the University of Ulster.

To ensure that the outputs of the sector are aligned as closely as possible with the needs of business and industry, colleges are encouraged to develop and strengthen partnerships with the key players in the local area. These partnerships should not only drive up the demand for learning, but put in place the infrastructure to satisfy demand. That is the aim behind the partnership fund operated by my Department, which was introduced in 1999 and called the collaboration fund. That initiative aims to establish partnerships inclusive of all major interests, including the business, voluntary and community groups, local councils and chambers of commerce. To date, my Department has provided £900,000 to that fund. The East Antrim Institute has put that money to good use and has advised the Department on a range of activities that it has taken forward on the basis of that funding, such as collaboration with the borough councils of Newtownabbey, Larne and Carrickfergus, the development of the East Antrim Learning Partnership and collaboration with businesses.

4.45 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker: I advise the Minister that there is only one more minute before the end of this debate.

Ms Hanna: I will move on swiftly, because I want to respond to some of the comments made in the debate. We have been talking about the task force on employability and long-term unemployment, and its report is due for consultation around the end of March. I hope that its proposals will be radical and innovative and will address seriously the core problems in our changing labour market and economy.

I want to respond briefly to the Members who spoke. Mr Beggs talked about the new TSN, and we await the outcome of that review. Mr Beggs, Mr O'Connor and others spoke about the Larne campus. Members are aware that an economic appraisal for a new facility has been approved. There has been some delay with the title deeds. However, it is hoped that the new further education college will be funded from the sale of the old campus, and I will do all I can to advance that as soon as possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I advise the Minister that, because we only have one hour for this debate,

she should take a few seconds to draw her remarks to a close and advise Members that she will give them written responses.

Ms Hanna: I will certainly respond to the Members. As I have said, my Department has an open door, and I will be happy to talk to any Members. I assure all

Members — and particularly Mr Beggs, who raised this matter — that I will do everything in my power to bring employment back to the east Antrim area as soon as possible. I appreciate Members' participation in the debate, and I will take all their views on board.

Adjourned at 4.47 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 18 February 2002

The Assembly met at noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I first wish to make a statement on a previous point of order.

At the sitting on Tuesday 12 February, Mr Billy Hutchinson asked on a point of order why the time allocated by the Business Committee to the debate on the motion 'Protecting Children, Supporting Parents' (2000) was extended.

The Deputy Speaker put the question that the debate be extended on the basis that it appeared to be the clear wish of all Members present; there was no dissenting voice. In the event, almost no extra time was required for the debate.

I must make it clear that Standing Orders make no provision for such an extension. Indeed, it is clearly the role of the Business Committee alone to allocate times for categories of business; Standing Order 10(2) refers. Therefore, the question of extending the time was not in order. Where Members have tabled a motion that they would perceive as requiring a substantive debate, they should make that known to their representative on the Business Committee.

I wish to make it clear that the events that took place during the motion 'Protecting Children, Supporting Parents' (2000) are in no way to be construed as setting a precedent. Such a question should not be put again under current Standing Orders.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that the Game Preservation (Amendment) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Game Preservation (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 became law on 13 February 2002.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 24 September 2001, the Assembly unanimously agreed a motion standing in my name

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to establish an inter-departmental working group to make recommendations on the removal —

Mr Speaker: Order, order. I must caution the Member. I am prepared to take a point of order if that is genuinely what it is, but not if it is a question of making a speech or a political point.

Mr McCarthy: The point is that the Assembly unanimously agreed to set up an interdepartmental working group, yet I received a reply from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to say that that was not allowed.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order. If the Member wishes to draw my attention to a problem that he perceives to be of a constitutional nature between the Assembly and the Executive, he should do so with me privately in the first instance, and then we can see what appropriate action can be taken.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If the ruling that you have just made reflects how matters stand, Standing Orders must be changed. No House that I know of is not master of itself. The House should be sovereign, especially when it is unanimous, so we must look at the Standing Orders.

Mr Speaker: It is perfectly in order for the Procedures Committee to look at the Standing Orders. Several arguments can be adduced in either direction. Sometimes it is not hard to reach unanimity in the House because so few Members are present. If my attention is drawn to the absence of a quorum, the House must suspend. In such contexts, to get the leave of the House may not be too difficult.

The Member has raised a very clear argument. It is quite appropriate for that matter to be brought to the Procedures Committee, which, if it wishes, can bring the matter to the House. That is the proper order of things.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you confirm that, although the procedure was invalid, the original decision was not invalid even though it may have been taken after the allotted time?

Mr Speaker: The Member is correct. It is inappropriate for the Speaker to make a ruling in such post hoc circumstances that has a retrospective outcome.

PUBLIC PETITION

Closure of Mosside Primary School

Mr Speaker: Mr Ian Paisley Jnr has begged leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I beg leave to present a petition from residents in the village of Mosside in north Antrim. The petition refers to the proposed closure of Mosside Primary School later this year and is signed by 200 people from the village who are opposed to the closure of that small, rural primary school. The petition says that closure will damage the future of the village and remove from children a local school that has an impressive record of good results, in spite of shortfalls in departmental resources and competition from other local schools.

To remove a school from any village decimates the heart of a village and takes children from the area. The closure of the school will inconvenience the local rural community and cause great upset. The petitioners also make clear that, alongside educational and community arrangements for maintaining the school, there is a substantial question of the safety of children on the roads.

Mr Paisley Jnr moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I shall convey the petition to the Minister responsible and to the Chairperson of the associated Committee.

KILKEEL FISHING TRAGEDY AND NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council, which met in the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission sector on 1 February 2002 in County Armagh. The Minister also wishes to address a more immediate matter that happened over the weekend.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, before I make my statement on the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission sectoral meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, I wish to make a few remarks on the recent fishing tragedy in Kilkeel.

The entire House will join with me in expressing our deepest sympathy to the Greene family and to the entire fishing community on this unspeakable tragedy, which has taken the lives of three generations of one family, including that of an eight-year-old boy. I have visited members of the family, whose main concern is to find the boat and recover their loved ones' bodies.

As soon as I became aware of the need for naval support to assist the search, I spoke to British Minister John Spellar and to the Irish Government. My concern was to secure the necessary back-up as quickly as possible. It became clear that the Royal Navy did not have an adequately equipped naval vessel available in local waters. I am, however, pleased to report that the Irish naval vessel LE Eithne is being mobilised and will leave its base in County Cork this afternoon. It is expected to arrive on the County Down coast in the early hours of Tuesday morning.

I pay tribute to the local fishing fleet and to the other boats, including our fisheries protection vessel, the Ken Vickers. They have worked tirelessly in the past couple of days on this very sad search. We can only hope that the arrival of the LE Eithne will help to bring some solace to the Greene family.

I also express my appreciation to the British Government for their co-operation, and to the Irish Government for their speedy response to this awful human tragedy.

The seventh meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council for the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights sector took place on Friday 1 February 2002 at the Slieve Gullion Courtyard, Killeavey, south Armagh.

Following nomination by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Mr Dermot Nesbitt and I represented

Northern Ireland. Mr Frank Fahey, Minister for the Marine and Natural Resources, represented the Irish Government. The papers for the meeting were issued to Executive Committee members on 28 January.

The meeting opened with a report from the chairman of the board of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission, Mr Peter Savage. The report detailed the board's progress in work on shellfisheries, the interpretive centre and marine tourism. He also referred to the review of the Loughs Agency's staffing structure, which Ministers had requested be carried out following their approval of an interim staffing structure. A draft report on the review, carried out by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, was presented to the agency on 9 January. The draft report was forwarded to the sponsoring Departments for comment and considered by the board at a meeting during the last week of January. My Department is considering the report as a matter of priority and will respond to it as soon as possible.

Dr Pat Griffin, a member of the board of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission, then gave an account of a recent visit to Holland by board members and Loughs Agency staff. Holland has one of the most efficient and sustainable mussel industries in Europe, and the agency chose that destination as it represented a useful learning opportunity.

The visit incorporated trips to licensed sites, the Fisheries Research Institute and the auction facilities. The agency was impressed by the emphasis placed on such environmental factors as the sustainability of bird populations and the treatment of predators. The agency was also impressed by the industry's capacity to identify and move mussel seed between different plots deemed suitable for different stages of mussel growth, and with the efficiency of the electronic auction system, which can accept bids for mussel stock from around the world. It was apparent to our visiting colleagues that good management of the shellfisheries in Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough has the potential to create a valuable export market to Holland.

The chief executive of the agency, Mr Derick Anderson, provided the meeting with an explanation for the delay in presenting accounts for the agency's predecessor, the Foyle Fisheries Commission, and the knock-on delay that that has caused in presenting agency accounts. He explained that a computerised accountancy system had been introduced, on which all accounts operated accurately with the exception of the nominal ledger. The difficulties with the nominal ledger were not fully exposed for some time, as the Foyle Fisheries Commission and, latterly, the Loughs Agency were under resource pressure due to additional work as a result of an expanding remit.

To rectify the problems with the nominal ledger, the Loughs Agency employed consultants PriceWaterhouseCoopers, and recruited and trained additional administrative

staff. With that extra support, the agency was able to provide all required information to facilitate completion of the audit of outstanding accounts.

Fully audited accounts for the Foyle Fisheries Commission for the years 1997, 1998 and 1999 were due to be forwarded to the agency during the week ending 15 February. Responsibility for the audit of accounts for the Loughs Agency for the years 2000 and 2001 rests with the Northern Ireland Audit Office. It has already undertaken the bulk of the groundwork, but it requires closed 1999 accounts before it can finalise the audit of the later accounts.

12.15 pm

It is anticipated that the accounts for 2000-01 will be completed in March. The chief executive apologised for the delay in finalising the outstanding accounts and assured Ministers that appropriate mechanisms, staff and controls are now in place to ensure that the Loughs Agency does not cause such delays again.

The chief executive advised the meeting of the progress that has been made towards completing the agency's interpretive centre. The agency is undertaking a baseline survey to establish the level of children's knowledge of the fishery resource, and some video footage has been shot of salmon spawning in the River Finn. Plans for the interior design and decoration of the centre are under way, and the agency is on target and within budget to open it by September 2002.

Ministers were updated on the agency's plans to host a workshop on research into seal predation of salmon and on the continuing positive impact of the salmon carcass tagging scheme, particularly the significant downturn in illegal netting and the increase in logbook returns, especially from anglers. That enhancement of the agency's management data will make a positive contribution to its ability to manage and conserve the valuable salmon fisheries in the Foyle area.

The chief executive referred to the agency's work with angling clubs and fishery owners on applications for EU funding for several enhancement projects. He looks forward to the positive contribution such projects have the potential to make to increasing the number of salmon in the system.

Ministers took the opportunity to thank the agency for its continuing good work, and, in particular, they urged it to do everything in its power to advance its outstanding accounts.

Ministers considered and approved the agency's corporate plan for 2002-04 and its business plan for 2002. The corporate plan sets out its objectives for the management, protection, conservation and improvement of salmon, inland and shellfish fisheries in the Foyle and Carlingford areas, and the development of marine tourism. It also outlines its objectives for the statutory

equality obligations, the development of its staff, and health and safety at work and includes budgetary details.

The business plan sets more specific targets for 2002. It addresses issues such as aquaculture licensing, the reduction of illegal fishing, the provision of advice on a range of issues, including pollution prevention, awareness raising, and the provision and use of a variety of management information to inform and support the management of the fisheries. Printed copies will be available from the agency's headquarters in March.

Ministers considered a paper on the progress made in establishing an advisory forum that was approved at an earlier meeting. Its purpose is to ensure that those with an interest in the use and management of the resources in the Foyle and Carlingford areas have a mechanism through which their views may be put to the agency. The selection process was undertaken on the agency's behalf by management consultants. There were some initial difficulties in recruiting a sufficient number of people to represent all the interests, but we were pleased to note that, following a further targeted recruitment exercise, the full range of representation has been achieved. Members of the advisory forum include representatives of shellfishing, draft net fishing, drift net fishing, anglers, fishery owners, tourism, environmental groups, local businesses, councils, ports and harbours, forestry and agriculture.

The advisory forum held its first meeting at the end of January, when members were given detailed presentations on the work of the agency and its future plans. It is proposed that, when it meets again in March, individual focus groups will be set up to concentrate on advising the agency on specific areas of interest.

Ministers noted the final version of the agency's equality scheme, which received approval from the Equality Commission on 7 November 2001, and approved its New TSN action plan. Both the equality scheme and the action plan underpin the agency's work, and their implementation will strengthen its commitment to equality, fairness, and tackling social need and social exclusion. Copies of both documents are available from the agency on request.

Ministers considered a paper on the difficulties presented by an aquaculture site in Carlingford Lough, licensed by the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources, the boundaries of which have caused problems for Northern fishermen trying to access the public mussel fishery. Minister Fahey accepted that a speedy resolution was required, and officials from both Departments, along with staff from the Loughs Agency, have been asked to resolve the issue by the next meeting.

Progress on the drafting of the Foyle and Carlingford fisheries Bill was discussed next. The Bill proposes to extend the functions of the agency in line with the

North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 and to update the Foyle fisheries Acts. To date, good progress has been made in resolving some intricate policy matters. As the legislation affects both parts of the island of Ireland, it was agreed that drafting of the provisions would be split between the relevant offices, North and South. Although the Office of the Legislative Counsel has produced its part of the Bill, progress has been hampered in the South by the involvement of their draftsman in drafting other Bills. However, Minister Fahey agreed to encourage the Attorney-General's Office to give the Bill priority, with a view to producing the South's contribution to the draft as soon as possible to facilitate introduction in the Assembly and the Dáil at the earliest opportunity.

The meeting considered a paper on the transfer of the functions of the Commissioners of Irish Lights to the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission. It is clear that the functions of the commissioners will remain a reserved matter, with the UK Government continuing to exercise policy and funding control as a consequence of their responsibility as trustees of the general lighthouse fund. Therefore, it appears that the Lights Agency element of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission will not comply with the definition of an implementation body, as set out in strand two of the Good Friday Agreement. Members will be aware that the matter has been referred to the North/South Ministerial Council in its institutional format. At its meeting on 17 December, it was agreed that officials from both Administrations and from the joint secretariat of the North/South Ministerial Council would consider the matter further, and offer advice and recommendations to the council. Preliminary discussions have begun with a view to submitting a report and recommendations to the next meeting of the Council in its institutional format.

The North/South Ministerial Council agreed to meet again in April 2002, and it approved a joint communiqué, a copy of which has been placed in the Assembly Library.

This statement was made on my behalf and on behalf of Mr Nesbitt.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I am sure that the House will endorse the Minister's remarks at the beginning of her statement and will wish to express its sympathy also. It has been said that great grief is not good at talking, and how true that is. Who can express the depth of sorrow caused by the wound that has been inflicted by the loss of three generations of one family? I am sure that everyone in the Assembly understands that.

I welcome the fact that vessels will be sent to that area. I received a representation from Kilkeel yesterday.

I spoke to Mr Spellar's personal secretary and pointed out that the fishermen were worried that bad weather would mean that the vessels would not be of much use. However, the weather conditions were favourable.

Given the size of the British naval service, I am amazed that it does not have a boat with the equipment to do this job. We are grateful to the Dublin authorities for sending a vessel. However, I ask the Minister to press the British authorities further to send a fully-equipped naval vessel that has the ability to carry out the soundings necessary to search for the lost vessel. Two boats could cover a greater area than one.

Everyone knows that it is imperative to find the vessel, so that the bodies of those who have been lost can be brought back and receive a burial, and so that the family can have one sore anointed with healing balm. The other sore and its scar will remain on their lives for ever. I wish the boats well in their efforts to find the bodies.

I salute all the fishermen in that area and all those who went out in boats to help the search. I also salute the strength of the family at this time and trust that the bodies will soon be brought back to the home port.

Ms Rodgers: I thank the Member for his remarks and expression of sympathy to the family. I am deeply grateful that a vessel is being prepared to leave Haulbowline in County Cork at 2.00 pm to travel up the Irish coast. It is hoped that it will reach the Down coast by 2.00 am tomorrow morning, and I understand that it will begin the search immediately.

I recognise that the family's grief is being added to by the fact that the bodies have not been recovered and that, as Dr Paisley has said, it would be a great ease to them if they could be recovered. I have been informed that the police diving team has offered its services to the coastguard, while the fishing fleet and the Ken Vickers are fully involved in the search. Should it become apparent that a wreckage has been found, the police divers will offer help to the coast guard or the lifeboat service, whichever may be appropriate. That is an example of the great co-operation that there has been throughout the community, North/South, east/west and within all the Government agencies to try to resolve one of the greatest tragedies that I have known in fishing history in my lifetime in this part of the world. We must also remember that a brother of Michael Greene was drowned in Kilkeel harbour 13 years ago. This has been a real tragedy for this family.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Savage): On behalf of my party, I would like to express our sympathy to the family. Our thoughts are with all those involved.

I welcome the Minister's statement and am glad that great interest was taken in the salmon fishing industry

and also in the tagging scheme. What impact have the salmon that escaped from the farm fishery had on wild salmon, and have any steps been taken to ensure that such an incident does not happen again?

Ms Rodgers: My understanding is that the salmon that escaped from the Glenarm fishery have had no significant impact.

Mr Bradley: As an Assembly Member for South Down, I wish to be associated with the expressions of sympathy from the Minister and the Committee Chairperson. The tragic events of last Thursday night will be remembered in the Mourne for generations to come. I also wish to put on record my appreciation of the services that worked around the clock on the rescue mission and then the search, including the local lifeboat service, which did a tremendous job co-ordinating all those involved. I would not like this occasion to pass without paying tribute to the Minister for her efforts yesterday to expedite the search.

What plans does the Loughs Agency have to develop marine tourism in Carlingford Lough and Lough Foyle, and when does the agency intend to publish those plans?

Ms Rodgers: The Loughs Agency is currently preparing a tourism strategy that will set out the agency's plans for the development of marine tourism in the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

The agency plans to concentrate on improving marine tourism by developing the recreation and leisure aspects of fisheries and catchments. However, it does not propose to provide direct funding. The agency also intends to commission a marine tourism audit in the Foyle and Carlingford areas to ascertain the level of facilities currently available. The agency hopes to publish its marine tourism strategy later this year.

12.30 pm

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I extend my sympathy, and that of my Colleagues, to the Greene family and the local community. Such communities have always been prepared to face the worst that the sea has often dealt to them: Nevertheless, such incidents are still an enormous tragedy for them.

I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly her comments on the work that continues on the overall meeting. The Fisheries Bill was discussed, as was the progress made, North and South. We need the draft legislation as soon as possible to facilitate the early introduction of the Bill in the Assembly and in the Dáil. What progress has been made on that legislation, given the fact that it has been delayed?

Ms Rodgers: Legislation is necessary to provide the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission with the power to license and develop aquaculture.

The drafting of the legislation is progressing, and I intend to introduce the Bill later this year. My officials are fully committed to taking the Bill forward, but progress is subject to parallel development in both jurisdictions.

The Bill was initially delayed due to several difficulties in establishing a mechanism to enable those people aggrieved at decisions of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission on aquaculture applications to appeal. It also proved more difficult than anticipated to obtain the agreement of legal advisors in both jurisdictions on several policy matters. Most of those issues have now been resolved, but further delay has occurred because, due to competing priorities, the draftsman in the South has been unable to produce a draft of the Bill. However, we hope that that matter will now be addressed. I have spoken about the matter to Minister Fahey, who is arranging to have the issue prioritised. I hope to be able to progress the legislation soon.

Mr Wells: The Minister will accept that one of the most painful duties that we have had in the last few days has been to visit the homes of those who were so tragically struck by this dreadful incident. Can she assure me that her Department will put the maximum pressure on the Marine Accident Investigation Board to ensure that a Royal Navy vessel, in addition to the Irish Navy vessel, is sent immediately to this area to assist? It is unfortunate that no Royal Navy vessel was available for dispatch to the area. Although we appreciate the help offered by the Irish Government, the situation flags up a concern for the future.

Does the Minister also agree that it is vital that lines of communication be clarified, so that if such a dreadful incident should happen again there would be one point of contact with the marine authorities to ensure that a vessel would be dispatched immediately? One of the great difficulties yesterday was that no one was certain of who had the final authority on the matter. That was one of the reasons for the delay.

Finally, can she assure the House that if the trawler is found, and if it is deemed necessary to raise it to the surface, there will be no delay in doing so and a Government Department will fund that work? The bodies need to be found, so as to give closure to the family affected by this terrible event.

Ms Rodgers: I agree. I have done everything in my power to ensure that the necessary back-up support of naval vessels from either or both jurisdictions is made available, and I will continue to use my influence to ensure progress on that.

I have already reported about the progress so far. I understand from Mr Wells that there was some confusion yesterday morning in the lines of communication. I heard about the incident from the fishermen's representative at 2.00 pm on the radio and was able to establish immediately the responsibility of the Department for

Transport, Local Government and the Regions across the water and the Ministry of Defence, which has the remit of the naval fleet. It is a reserved matter, of course, so responsibility lies with those Departments. However, as the Minister responsible for fisheries here, I felt that it was incumbent on me to do everything possible to ensure that the necessary back-up was provided. I was pleased to be able to do that and to have the L E Eithne prepared and soon to be on her way up here. Any other matters relating to the operation of the naval fleet are not my responsibility, but I take the point. It is important that back-up should be available when and if necessary.

If the trawler is located, I will do everything possible to ensure that it is raised, because that is extremely important for the families.

Mr J Wilson: I welcome the explanation in the report, and I note the apology about the delay in finalising the Foyle Fisheries Commission's accounts and the Loughs Agency's accounts. I also welcome the establishment of the advisory forum and the focus groups, which will represent interest groups in the Loughs Agency's catchment area. However, was the opportunity taken to impress on Minister Fahey that, although he is reducing the number of net licences and quotas, the Republic of Ireland still lags behind Northern Ireland and other European countries on measures to bring to an end the slaughter — and that is the only word that I can use to describe it — of the salmon off our coasts?

Ms Rodgers: I stated in my report that the agency's presentation of the 2000-01 accounts was delayed because the accounts of the Foyle Fisheries Commission had not been finalised. We now hope to have full accounting in March. The corporate business plans are currently with the designers, and they should be available in March. Copies will be made available from the Loughs Agency's headquarters in Prehen and its regional office in Carlingford. The agency's equality scheme will be published in full in this April or May, and its New TSN action plan can be viewed on its web site.

The Loughs Agency has no plans at the moment to buy out salmon nets, but the stocks of salmon returning to the Foyle catchment area are managed effectively to ensure that spawning escapement targets are achieved each year. The effectiveness of the conservation and protection regulations introduced by the agency to help manage the fish stocks are continually kept under review using data collected from fish counters, population surveys and catch returns. As escapement targets are currently being achieved, and a stable commercial and recreational fishery exists, the agency has no plans to introduce further conservation measures at this time.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly her reference to the current state of salmon

stocks in the Foyle system. I commend the good work of many angling clubs, through several projects. What measures has the Loughs Agency taken to conserve and protect salmon stocks in the Foyle?

Ms Rodgers: In association with my Department, Queen's University Belfast and the Irish Marine Institute in Dublin, the Loughs Agency has engaged in a two-year genetic study of salmon populations for the purpose of obtaining further management information to ensure the future sustainability of salmon stocks in the Foyle system. The agency has also introduced a salmon carcass tagging scheme, which prohibits the sale of untagged salmon. That has resulted in a substantial reduction in the levels of poaching in the Foyle and Carlingford areas, thus enabling the agency to direct more resources toward enhancement, development and reinstatement of the catchments. Therefore, ultimately, it will further improve the productivity of the catchments. The tagging scheme also requires anglers to complete logbooks detailing the number of catches made. Those logbooks will provide the agency with valuable information that will help to ensure that the fisheries of the Foyle and Carlingford areas continue to be managed effectively.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I too want to extend my sympathy to the Greene family on the awful tragedy, especially since I come from near that area. Can the Minister throw any further light on the apparent red tape that delayed the operational search and rescue mission travelling to the scene of the Kilkeel tragedy? Will she look at ways of liaising with her Dublin counterparts to ensure a quicker response from their naval resources in the future on operations affecting our fishing fleet?

Ms Rodgers: I am not sure that I understood the second question. I will deal with the first, and perhaps the second can be repeated.

As I said, I responded as soon as I was made aware of the issue at 2.00 pm, when I was on my way to visit the families. I did not come across any red tape difficulties. I was able to establish immediately that the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions and the Ministry of Defence across the water shared the responsibility — the former is responsible for the coastguard and the latter for the naval vessel. I assure the Member that between 2.00 pm and 5.00 pm, I was able to reach a resolution.

The Member may be referring to the long delay in getting the vessel up here. It takes a while, particularly on a Sunday evening, to assemble the crew — at least five or six hours, perhaps longer during a weekend. It then takes several hours to prepare the vessel for steaming and considerable time for the vessel to come from Cork to the Down coast. There was another delay while they

ensured that they were able to get the divers, an important element for the recovery.

I am not sure whether I fully understood or heard the second part of the question.

Mr Speaker: Perhaps the Member might help us by repeating the second part of his question.

Mr M Murphy: The Dublin authorities were not contacted until yesterday. The tragedy occurred on Friday, but the Minister said that it was when she was on her way to visit the family yesterday that she became aware of the red tape that affected the operation. Will the Minister contact her Dublin counterparts to ensure that there will be an immediate response if a tragedy happens again in the lough or in that area?

Ms Rodgers: I explained to the Member that I did not encounter any such red tape difficulties. When the tragedy happened, the Ken Vickers, which is the departmental fisheries boat, the local fishing fleet and the coastguard were all involved in the search.

12.45 pm

The official search was called off when it became clear that it was a search for bodies. At that point the naval vessel became an issue, and I immediately contacted the Dublin authorities once I was made aware of that. As I said, I am grateful for the very quick response that I received. The delay from yesterday until today was due to the logistics of getting the vessel on the sea.

Mr Gibson: Through the Chair, I express my sympathy to the bereaved family. I ask the Minister to ensure that in such an emergency, the first contact will always be made with our own United Kingdom Government and its Royal Navy.

With reference to the Minister's North/South Ministerial Council meeting, have there been any investigations into freshwater mussels and their use as a potential for export markets? Has any investigation been carried out into the zebra mussel, a freshwater mussel that has become a plague in most of the Southern rivers and lakes, and is now a threat to our rivers and estuaries? What progress has the Minister made in ensuring that our waters are not polluted by this plague of freshwater mussels?

Secondly, the Minister referred to the completion of the agency's interpretive centre. Where will this centre be, and how many staff will be employed?

Thirdly, the fishermen of Lough Foyle tell me that poaching still causes their greatest loss of revenue. Very few salmon make it into the River Mourne, through Sion Mills and up to the headwaters of the Foyle, the Strule, the Drumragh, and the Camowen. What effective action has been taken? Despite the attempt at tagging, there has not as yet been a successful effort to control illegal poaching of salmon in the Foyle

estuary or the Foyle waters. I appeal to the Minister, on behalf of the people of those areas who depend on the industry for tourism, to make every effort to ensure that adequate salmon stock emerge in those headwaters.

Ms Rodgers: I thank the Member for his numerous questions, of which I lost count.

I am disappointed at the suggestion that my first contact was not with the UK Government. I made it clear that I contacted the UK Government and then the Irish Government. It does not matter to the families in distress who comes to the rescue. I, and the whole community in Kilkeel, am aware of that.

I will write to Mr Gibson to inform him of the situation in regard to freshwater mussels, as I do not have all the details.

I did not hear the question about the interpretive centre.

Mr Speaker: The Member asked where it is.

Ms Rodgers: The centre is in Derry/Londonderry, Doire Chomcille. [*Laughter*].

I think the Member understands the answer.

Mr Speaker: It is, after all, an interpretive centre. [*Laughter*].

Ms Rodgers: It would be wiser to say that it is in Prehen, and that would avoid any problems.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Minister for both parts of her statement. At the end of her statement, she said that the Lights Agency element of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission would not comply with the definition of an implementation body, as set out in strand two of the Good Friday Agreement.

Have the Minister and her Executive Colleagues considered the possibility that the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission could become an implementation body under the auspices of the British-Irish Council?

Ms Rodgers: That has not been considered at this time, but I take the point.

Mr Shannon: What happened last week in Kilkeel was a tragedy. As a Member for the Strangford constituency, I remember a similar search off the Isle of Man for the body of the crewman and boat owner Tom Hughes. At that time, the help of the Royal Navy was requested. The good work of the locals, who dived and searched, led to the retrieval of the body for the funeral.

A rapid reaction is needed. What is the Minister doing to ensure that that legislation can be changed? She said that it was a reserved matter. However, what representations can the Minister or her Department make on that?

Mr Speaker: Order. It is wise to point out to the House that questions to a Minister must refer only to the Minister's responsibility. It is clear that the burden of the question that the Member is asking is on a reserved matter; which is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Defence. For the Member to tread on that is to tread on the parliamentary responsibilities of his colleagues who are Members at Westminster. It may well be that he wishes to press the Minister on making representations. That would not be inappropriate. However, to ask the Minister questions about matters outwith her responsibilities would be out of order.

Mr Shannon: What representations are the Minister and her Department making to Westminster to see what can be done to make the Royal Navy more accountable and reactive when help is needed? We require an effective and co-ordinated response. Our fishermen deserve the full support of the authorities. A clear message must be sent from the Assembly and the Minister that we are doing everything that we can to help them.

Ms Rodgers: Since yesterday, my only priority has been to do everything in my power as a Minister, and to use all my influence, to assist the recovery of the bodies and the boat. I have bent all my energies towards that. I have not looked at any further steps that might be taken: That is for another day. My priority is to try to relieve, in some manner, the awful distress that the Greene family is going through.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I also associate myself with the expressions of grief to the Greene family of Aughnaloopy and Ballymartin. At this tragic time, it is hard to conceive of any rainbow that could brighten such a shadow of tears for that family.

In her statement, the Minister said that an advisory forum had been established. Which management consultants were engaged by the Department to carry out that work? How were they selected, and how much did it cost the Government? Did the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development have to foot the entire bill?

Ms Rodgers: The management consultants were PriceWaterhouseCoopers, as I believe I said in my statement. I did not hear the second part of the question.

Mr Paisley Jnr: How were they selected, and how much did it cost the Government? Did the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development have to foot the entire bill?

Ms Rodgers: The Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission selected the management consultants by a process of tendering.

Mr Paisley Jnr: What was the cost?

Ms Rodgers: I will check with the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission. I do not have those details, but I will provide the Member with that information.

Mr Speaker: That brings to an end questions to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

RAILWAY SAFETY BILL

First Stage

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA Bill 3/01] to make provision with respect to the safety of railways.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future pending business until a date for its Second Stage has been determined.

BUDGET BILL

Second Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill (NIA Bill 2/01) be agreed.

In moving the motion, I will draw attention briefly to a few points. The debate follows the Bill's First Stage on Tuesday 12 February, and the Supply resolutions for the 2001-02 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2002-03 Vote on Account, which were also considered and approved last week. The Bill can be given accelerated passage because the Committee for Finance and Personnel has confirmed that, in line with Standing Order 40, the Committee is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill. This condition has been met, and the confirmation was given in a letter dated 5 February from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel to the Speaker. I welcome the Committee's assistance in the matter, especially in view of the concerns that the Committee has expressed about the process and its role within it. For the record, I understand those concerns and recognise the need to address them over the coming months.

The purpose of the Budget Bill is to give legislative effect to the resource Estimates approved through the Supply resolutions passed last Monday. Given the wide-ranging and valuable debate that we had then, I do not intend to delay the start of today's debate with unnecessary repetition of the detail that I covered last week when I introduced the Supply resolutions. Members have received copies of the detailed spring Supplementary Estimates booklet and the Vote on Account statement. Copies of the Budget Bill and associated explanatory and financial memorandum should also be available. However, for the benefit of the Assembly, I wish to summarise briefly the main features of the Bill in accordance with the nature of the Second Stage debate envisaged under Standing Order 30.

The Bill authorises the issue of £198 million from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund in respect of the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2001-02 and appropriates this sum to specific services as set out in schedule 1. Schedule 2 authorises the use of additional resources for 2001-02 amounting to £574 million and details the revised limits for accruing resources.

The Vote on Account provided for in the Bill for 2002-03 is to allow funds to continue to flow to public services for the early months of the incoming financial year until the Main Estimates can be presented to, and considered by, the Assembly. For the Vote on Account, the Budget Bill seeks the issue from the Consolidated

Fund of the sum of £3,936 million and its appropriation to services as set out in schedule 3. In addition, it seeks the Assembly's authorisation for the use of resources amounting to £4,486 million as set out in schedule 4.

I was most interested to hear the many views expressed by Members during last week's useful debate. I endeavoured to answer most of the questions at the time or to provide responses later, either personally or from my ministerial Colleagues as appropriate.

There is little more that I can usefully add on the substance of the Budget Bill, but I shall respond to any points raised by Members on the principle of the Bill.

1.00 pm

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

The Assembly offers Members a great opportunity to influence public expenditure allocations, to hold Departments accountable for those allocations and to ensure that the outcomes promised as part of the spending programmes are delivered. As I said earlier, our budgetary processes are still evolving, and each budgetary exercise is important in helping us to understand problems or difficulties that we can improve on or address. I accept that we may need to refine our processes, where that is possible, within the limitations of the existing system. However, it is fair to say that the Assembly has undertaken its responsibilities for public expenditure, authorisation and control with considerable care and diligence.

I wish to draw attention to the fact that, in the coming months, the Executive will be engaged in intensive preparations for, and negotiations on, the spending review 2002. That review will set parameters for expenditure for the following three years.

The challenges posed by the need to meet the significant investment requirements of many of our services are probably already apparent to all Members. In the past two years, we have seen the expenditure limits imposed by the available resources, and the difficult choices that are necessary in order to ensure that fair and equitable allocations were made. The Executive are examining, in a fundamental way, the basis of current resource allocations by the Treasury. In that respect, the Barnett formula is being subjected to detailed and rigorous analysis to determine the extent to which it should, or should not, continue to be the basis for determining those resources. Alongside that examination, the Executive, as Members may be aware, are also conducting detailed needs assessments across all the Departments. Those assessments are intended to provide information on the precise scale of need in each Department with respect to the services for which it has responsibility.

It is widely recognised that there is a major backlog in investment and that that backlog exists across almost

all our services and infrastructure. We have to ensure, therefore, that our case is as strong, robust and well founded as we can make it.

Our needs are considerable. Given the signals from London, there is little doubt that we have a major task ahead in ensuring that the outcome of the forthcoming spending review is as favourable to us as it is possible to make it.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and for his recognition of the Committee's concerns. The Committee for Finance and Personnel confirmed to the Assembly that it was satisfied that the requirements of Standing Order 40(2) regarding consultation had been met, so that the Bill could proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

The Committee did not do that lightly, and there was quite a debate on the issue, because it places a premium on the involvement of the Assembly and its Committees in the Budget process. The Committee for Finance and Personnel will wish to ensure that the arrangements for consulting Committees during the impending review year are comprehensive, timely and effective, and meet with the approval of all Committees. The Minister should be alert to the concerns regularly expressed by the Assembly Committees that they are not consulted effectively by Departments and that the timely provision of budgetary information by Departments is not always as good as it should be to allow Committees to perform their statutory role.

It is essential, therefore, that when the Minister announces the timetable for the spending review in March, Committees be built into the consultation process from the beginning. Before signing off on accelerated passage for the next Budget Bill in June, the Committee for Finance and Personnel will need to be assured by other Committees that appropriate consultation has taken place and is planned before the draft Budget is introduced in September. That process of consultation is important in the spending review year. Committees will wish to see a positive benefit from the resources obtained from the Treasury, based on the needs and evaluation work of the Committees concerned.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel recognises and supports the Executive's priority focus on the need for substantial additional resources for the Health Service, education and the infrastructure. There are depressing daily accounts of how hospitals are failing to meet the needs of the sick. Pictures of frail and elderly people on hospital trolleys do not do any of us any credit. It is important that we recognise that those who elect us expect and demand more. We must make a difference where it matters most. Innovative ways to raise revenue without targeting the most needy must

be used. The effectiveness and efficiency of public services must be examined rigorously to ensure best value.

Assembly Committees play a key role in scrutinising the work of Departments and in holding Ministers to account to the Assembly for the services for which they are responsible. Committees should be encouraged to target areas of poor performance and encourage value for money so that resources are freed up to meet those high priority needs. Departments still have a silo mentality.

Spending patterns must be challenged, evaluated and reset strategically. Appropriation of resources must be targeted to encourage greater co-operation between Departments. Short-term resources must be targeted on the immediate needs of the sick and must be matched by long-term strategic investments in health and education services. Better access to health services, and improvements in the social and physical environment of the population are needed. Long-term investments will lead to long-term savings through a more integrated approach in the public services.

The Minister's recent decision to review the effectiveness of the in-year monitoring procedure is welcomed, and indicates his concern that Departments are not entirely effective in quantifying their budget needs.

The Assembly is being asked to consider a Bill that appropriates a considerable amount of resources. Members will wish to be assured that those precious resources are deployed with maximum impact. The Committee for Finance and Personnel accepts that the Budget Bill is the end of a process of consultation with Departments. It also acknowledges that the process must focus on effective engagement with the Assembly and its Committees at an early stage if the Executive are to be truly accountable to the Assembly.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel looks forward to playing its part in the spending review process and encourages other Committees to play their part. They must be consulted and form part of the bidding process to ensure the effective use of resources. Go raibh maith agat.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Leslie): When we debated the Second Stage of the Government Resources and Accounts Bill, I was the only person who expressed the view that, rather than making the accounts clearer, resource accounting would make them more complicated. Now that we have had a first look at the new-style Estimates and the Budget Bill, I feel vindicated in having expressed that view.

The suggestion put forward by the Committee for Finance and Personnel to have some form of training and elucidation on the new accounting style provided for Members is valid. I hope that that training will

proceed shortly. I have no reason to believe that the Department is resistant to that suggestion and look forward to implementing it.

After the recent Enron affair, many comments were made concerning creative accounting in the private sector. I expressed the view that a snag in moving to resource-based accounting is that the scope for creative accounting is considerably greater in the Government sector. The problem is not as severe when the Government are not responsible for the Supply side, as is the case here.

Nonetheless, Members must work diligently to understand how resource-based accounting works. I do not fully understand it myself. However, examining the use of assets, and how they are treated in the Government's books, will be helpful in informing our long-term investment decisions, especially those decisions on infrastructure.

The Minister emphasised that the three-year spending review will happen this year. I trust that the needs and effectiveness evaluation will be completed in time for the spending review, but it may be a close call. I am not sure how much input the Assembly and its Committees will have into that review. As I have said in other debates, it is no use trying to influence a Budget once it has been read. We must start to influence next year's Budget now. We have about six months in which to influence the Budget. Once figures are written down and the draft Budget is read in the autumn, the scope for influencing the final Budget becomes extremely limited.

This is the second full cycle in which the Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee, Mr Molloy, and I have made that point. It must be reiterated that Committees must start addressing budgetary issues immediately and in the coming months. There is a slight window in the Assembly's agenda before a heavy legislative programme begins in April. That may be the best chance that we shall have to get to grips with the budgetary issues for next year.

I acknowledge the Minister's comments on the Barnett formula and on proving the need for the resources that we currently receive. On the whole, we receive favourable treatment under the Barnett formula. I urge caution about following a divergent route, which carries the risk of a less favourable outcome. I note that comments were made recently in Westminster to the effect that it was unlikely that Barnett would be reviewed for the time being. I suspect that that will be to our advantage. I welcome the Budget Bill.

Ms McWilliams: The final spring Supplementary Estimates contain an amazing error. I want to give the Minister the opportunity to respond to the statement that £93 million was allocated in the Department of Employment and Learning for fees and expenses for

chairpersons and members of the industrial and fair employment tribunals. I doubt that the fees and expenses of those tribunals amounted to £93 million. The Minister should respond to that before the Bill goes through; he should give us the accurate figure.

I am also concerned about an issue that relates to the announcement that was made last year about free nursing care. That became a huge issue for the Budget. I wrote to the Minister asking him to outline the easements — the surrendered moneys for which Departments can bid — and I discovered that £3·3 million had been surrendered, despite the fact that most of the population in Northern Ireland would have been told that no money had been available for free nursing care. I am concerned that £3·3 million was left sitting in the Department's budget and was then surrendered. No doubt the Department made bids for other moneys.

Later in the year an announcement was made that resources would be found for free nursing care. I am concerned about that. Can the Minister reassure the House that the public are not being led to believe that that was new money, given that it had been there in the first instance?

1.15 pm

It may have been the case that we were not in a position to provide free nursing care because the legislation had not gone through. Perhaps that is the message that should have gone out at the time, rather than a message of insufficient funds being available. I know that £3·3 million might not have met all of the costs of introducing free nursing care at that time. However, before the Budget Bill goes through, we have an opportunity to clear the matter up. There was a surrender of £3·3 million. I have written to the Department and have received some explanation of it, but it is important that the matter be brought before the House.

Dr Farren: I thank the Members who have spoken during the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. The House has discussed many of the issues previously. It is not surprising, therefore, that a full-scale debate, as has occurred on previous occasions, has not developed this afternoon. I assure the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel that full consultation has, to the best of the Department's ability and within the time constraints applying, been taking place in the past two years. That consultation has been with the Committee for Finance and Personnel and all the other Committees, through contacts with officials and Ministers in the various Departments.

The point that I made, which was made on several occasions by my predecessor, is that Committees are able to take the initiative by probing likely developments with respect to the relevant departmental budgets. Committees could perhaps do that more vigorously in anticipation, rather than simply awaiting the outcome

of proposals relating to departmental bids. As was reflected in Mr Leslie's comments, Members do not have to await the end of the preparatory stages of the Budget for that kind of probing to take place. Committees can begin to make their investigations now. Indeed, I believe that there was an example of that last week from the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, which I commended. Prioritisation was taking place in a way that I felt was helpful to the deliberations of that Committee and to its engagement with the Department. Let us see Committees being more willing to take the initiative in relation to the budgetary planning process.

On the comments made by the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and by Prof McWilliams, I wish to emphasise that in-year monitoring takes place to determine what might be available to be allocated to help meet pressing needs identified by Departments. When Departments make bids with respect to what might be available from in-year monitoring, the Department of Finance and Personnel responds to how Departments have prioritised their particular needs.

The Executive agreed in principle to the introduction of free universal nursing care for the elderly in nursing homes from April 2002. The Budget for 2001 contained £4·5 million to enable the introduction of free nursing care from October 2002. I emphasise that those who are unable to meet the costs of their care already have access to free nursing care, and that will continue.

Legislation must be introduced, and procedures for the assessment of free nursing care developed and implemented. The figure of £4·5 million represents a part-year cost — it is not a reduction in the number of eligible people. The full-year cost is likely to be some £9 million. Additional funds will have to be found to support that in future years.

The process to ensure the delivery of what the Assembly sought is under way. The timetable for that is constrained by the need to have the necessary legislation in place, and not only by finance issues.

Ms McWilliams mentioned the allocation of £93 million to the Department of Employment and Learning. That appears to be a typing error, and should read as £93,000. That figure will be checked precisely, and the information will be provided to the Member in writing.

Mr Leslie mentioned the needs assessment exercise. It is hoped that some initial findings will be available at the end of March or early April to inform our approach to the spending review and the budgetary planning in which we shall be engaged in the next few months.

I acknowledge Mr Leslie's point about the Barnett formula. However, the Member should acknowledge that there is a need and an obligation on the Executive,

and especially on the Department of Finance and Personnel, to examine in considerable detail the extent to which the Barnett formula is robust enough to deliver our needs. We should be able to clearly identify any shortcomings in the formula and act upon them. We are currently examining the formula and its application to ensure that the bids are fairly and equitably met. That will also ensure that resources are available to meet the considerable challenges that I referred to in the concluding part of my opening address.

I have covered all the main points that were raised by the three Members who have spoken. I will correspond with Members on any point that I have overlooked.

Madam Deputy Speaker: As this is a finance Bill, Members will be aware that the vote requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill (NIA Bill 2/01) be agreed.

PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES (PRESERVED RIGHTS) BILL

First Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA Bill 4/01] to make provision in relation to persons in residential accommodation with preserved rights under the Income Support (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1987; and for connected purposes.

Molaim go dtugtar a Chéad Chéim don Bhille Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta (Cearta Forchoimeáda).

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of pending business until a date for its Second Stage has been determined.

PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES (PRESERVED RIGHTS) BILL

Accelerated Passage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 40(3), the Assembly grants accelerated passage to the Personal Social Services (Preserved Rights) Bill.

Molaim go dtugann an Tionól seo rith luathaithe don Bhille Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta (Cearta Forchoimeáda), de réir Bhuanordú 40 fo-mhír 3.

Nuair a tugadh isteach na socruithe cúraim phobail atá ann faoi láthair i 1993, bhí díolúine ag thart ar 9,000 duine i gcúram cónaitheach san earnáil neamhspleách ó na socruithe úra maoinithe agus bainistíochta sna seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta. Ina áit sin, fuair siad ceart forchoimeáda ar ráta ardaithe tacaíochta ioncaim as a ndíolfadh siad as a gcóiríocht chónaitheach.

Le gairid, rinne úinéirí tí agus a n-eagraíochtaí ionadaíochta uiríll faoina easpaí atá ráta na gceart forchoimeáda maidir lena gcostas feidhmithe. Lena chois sin, luadh go bhféadfadh an córas maoinithe a bheith ag clis ar dhaoine a b'fhearr a bhfóireadh cóiríocht thacaithe nó socruithe eile dóibh de bharr a easpa solúbthachta.

Mhol an Coimisiún Ríoga ar Chúram Fadtéarmach do Dhaoine Scothaosta i Sasana go mbreithneodh an Rialtas ar chóir íocaíochtaí cearta forchoimeáda i leas sóisialta a thabhairt faoin chóras cúraim phobail atá ann ó 1993; nó an bhféadfaí teacht ar réiteach éigin eile le haghaidh a thabhairt ar easnamh maoinithe an ghrúpa sin. Chomh maith le comhchomhairle an Choimisiúin Ríoga i mí Bealtaine agus i mí an Mheithimh 2000, rinne mo Roinn tuilleadh comhchomhairle áitiúla ar na roghanna. Bhíothas den tuairim gur chóir go n-aistreofaí freagracht as cásanna ceart forchoimeáda go gnáthshocruithe bainistíochta cúraim na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta, mar gur measadh go raibh sé míchothrom go gcaithfí go difriúil leo thar na daoine sin a tháinig isteach sa chóras i ndiaidh Aibreán 1993.

Tá an Bille Seirbhísí Sóisialta (Cearta Forchoimeáda) á thabhairt isteach le freagracht as cásanna ceart forchoimeáda a aistriú go gnáthshocruithe bainistíochta cúraim na n-iontaobhas sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta ó Aibreán 2002, áit a gcuirfeadh an loighic í. Tabharfaidh an Roinn Forbartha Sóisialta Rialacháin isteach le deireadh a chur lena dteideal ar thacaíocht ioncaim ag ráta ardaithe.

Is eol do Chomhaltaí go bhfuil sé i gceist go réachtálfai an córas leasa shóisialta anseo comhionann leis an chóras sa Bhreatain. Cuirfear deireadh ansin le teideal ar leas sóisialta ceart forchoimeáda le héifeacht

ó 8 Aibreán. Muna dtagaimid lena ndáta aistrithe, beidh cónaitheoirí agus a dteaghlaigh anseo faoi an-éiginnteacht, agus b'fhéidir go ndéanfadh sé an eamáil cúraim chónaithe agus an eamáil tí altranais a éagobhsú. Muna bhfuil an reachtaíocht riachtanach in áit againn, beidh dhá rogha theagmhásacha ann; tá an bheirt acu casta, agus ní beag na deacrachtaí a thógfadh siad.

1.30 pm

When the current community care arrangements were introduced in 1993, approximately 9,000 people in residential care in the independent sector were exempt from the new health and social services funding and care management arrangements. Instead, they acquired a preserved right to an enhanced rate of income support with which to pay for their residential accommodation.

In recent times, there have been many submissions from homeowners and their representative organisations about the inadequacy of the preserved rights rate in relation to their operating costs. Furthermore, it has been suggested that, due to its inflexibility, the funding system may be failing some people, who may be better suited to either supported accommodation or alternative arrangements.

In England, the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly recommended that the Government consider whether preserved rights payments and social security should be brought into the post-1993 system of community care funding or whether another solution could be found to address the shortfall in funding experienced by that group.

Further to the Royal Commission's consultation, in May and June 2000, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety carried out further local consultation on the available options. The overall opinion supported a transfer of responsibility for the preserved rights cases to the normal health and social services care management arrangements, as it was considered inequitable that those people be treated differently to those who entered the care system after April 1993.

The Personal Social Services (Preserved Rights) Bill is being introduced to transfer responsibility for the preserved rights cases to the normal care management arrangements of the health and social services trusts, where it more logically belongs, from April 2002. Regulations will also be implemented by the Department for Social Development to remove its entitlement for the enhanced rate of income support.

The intention is that the social security system here should run in parity with that in Great Britain. The entitlement to preserved rights social security in Great Britain will cease, with effect from 8 April. Failure to match that transfer date will result in considerable uncertainty for residents and their families here, and it could have a destabilising effect on the residential care

and nursing home sector. If the legislation is not in place, we will be faced with trying to make appropriate contingency arrangements, which would not be a straightforward exercise.

In the absence of the necessary legislation, two contingency options are most apparent. However, both are complex and will create many difficulties. The Social Security Agency might be able to continue to pay the enhanced benefit rates. However, because the legislation for the transfer is already in place in Great Britain, no preserved rights rates of benefit have been set for the period from 8 April onwards.

If the Department for Social Development were to set a preserved rights rate, even for a short period, it would break parity with Great Britain. Furthermore, the functionality of the computer system that enables the social security offices to pay the rates to customers is provided from England and will be removed on 7 April. The Social Security Agency would then have to seek other methods of making payments to approximately 1,700 people.

The other contingency option would be for approval to be given for the trusts to make payments on an extra-statutory basis. That poses considerable difficulties also. Under article 36(a) of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972, the trusts are barred from taking responsibility for those cases. Therefore, the Department would be seeking the agreement of the Department of Finance and Personnel to not only act in anticipation of impending law, but to act in contravention of the existing law. Even if that agreement were forthcoming, in addition to the administrative auditing and operational difficulties of acting in such a way, cases might slip through the net. That is because the Bill carries a provision for the sharing of information. Without that provision, it is impossible for the Social Security Agency and the boards and trusts to exchange personal details about the preserved rights customers to ensure that everyone is accounted for.

The Bill to enable the transfer is largely technical. It removes the current statutory bar to trusts taking responsibility for preserved rights cases and allows for the disclosure of information between the Social Security Agency and the boards and trusts to the extent that is necessary to ensure that all such cases are correctly identified.

The policy document for the Bill was first submitted to Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon last August. However, various delays and a request for further financial information meant that the Bill did not progress at the normal pace. That resulted in the Bill's reaching the First Stage only today, which is a delay of more than four months from the date originally planned.

The remit of the Bill has been reduced to contain only those provisions that relate to the preserved rights

transfer. Other provisions relating to nursing care costs and the professional body for nursing and midwifery will be contained in a separate Bill that will allow the normal Assembly procedures.

My officials met with the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the background to the changes, the need for legislation and the circumstances that have given rise to the situation with which we are now faced, where accelerated passage procedure is being requested. While Committee members have natural reservations about the use of accelerated passage procedure, in this instance they have accepted that the need is genuine and that the circumstances are exceptional. I am grateful to the Committee members for that. Although I cannot guarantee that the need for accelerated passage will never arise again, I assure Members that the circumstances of this Bill are exceptional, and I do not anticipate encountering them again.

Standing Order 40 permits a Bill to proceed, using accelerated passage, with the leave of the Assembly. Accordingly, I seek the leave of the House to proceed with accelerated passage on the Personal Social Services (Preserved Rights) Bill.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): The Committee has considered the Minister of Health's request for accelerated passage for the Personal Social Services (Preserved Rights) Bill. The Committee takes its responsibilities seriously and was concerned by the need to grant a public Bill accelerated passage, as that denies members the opportunity to scrutinise the Bill in detail during the Committee Stage. There is always a danger that bad legislation might be enacted if a Committee does not have the chance to consider the detail of a Bill. However, the Committee has questioned the Minister's officials about the reasons for the Bill and about the need for accelerated passage. Today the Minister told Members why new arrangements need to be put in place to manage the care of people with preserved rights and why the Bill needs to be in place by the end of April.

The Bill deals with equity of treatment for residents of independent residential and nursing homes with preserved rights who, since 1993, have continued to receive social security funding towards their accommodation costs. Some 1,740 vulnerable people will be affected by the changes. Because of the need to protect those people, the Committee accepts that the Bill be considered under accelerated passage.

The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety supports the motion.

Rev Robert Coulter: The reasons for the need for accelerated passage have been laid out clearly by the Minister. Although it is regretted that we will not have the opportunity to discuss a public Bill, in view of the

reasons given — and in particular those relating to equity of treatment for patients — I have no hesitation in supporting the motion.

Mr Morrow: My party and I support the concept of accelerated passage. In her statement the Minister said that it was imperative to keep abreast with legislation in the rest of the United Kingdom. We agree with that.

However, there has been a major departure in her party's stance on accelerated passage. About six months ago, accelerated passage was sought in the House for the Social Security Fraud Bill. Of course, her party put up a different argument then. I draw the House's attention to what was said then, and I ask the Minister to comment, now that her party's stance on this procedure has changed.

Speaking in this House on 18 June 2001, Mr Gerry Kelly said:

"The Minister has not given a good argument for accelerated passage, which is a bad method of putting any Bill through the Assembly. There are particular problems in the Bill, and every Member should have the opportunity to scrutinise it." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 11, Page 170*].

Is it only when another Minister introduces a Bill, or when the issue of fraud is being discussed, that the Minister's party has problems with accelerated passage?

Mr Kelly went on to say:

"It could affect people's human rights and invade their privacy."

I suspect that they have no such concerns about the invasion of human rights or privacy in the Chamber. He continued:

"I oppose the use of the accelerated passage procedure, and I hope that others will do likewise."

I welcome the change of heart now. I do not know when the road to Damascus experience took place. No doubt we will be told today. However, the Minister has made it clear that she wants accelerated passage so that we can maintain parity with the rest of the UK. She has also made it clear that, while it is not her preference to ask the House for accelerated passage, she may have to do so. Methinks that there is a degree of hypocrisy. I will leave the matter there.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I will not get involved in Maurice Morrow's rant on accelerated passage. Should he request a transcript of the Committee meeting in which the matter was discussed, he would see that our party has not changed its opinion on the need for accelerated passage.

I reluctantly support the motion. I am glad that officials are here today, because we had frank, and sometimes heated, discussions on the matter. As the Chairperson pointed out, we came to our decision reluctantly because, if it is approved accelerated passage, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public

Safety would not be able to scrutinise the Bill, clause by clause, during its Committee Stage. However, contrary to the beliefs of some Members — and I am glad that they find it so funny — 1,800 people would be disenfranchised if this Bill did not pass.

The Minister outlined the reasons why she is asking for the Bill to be given accelerated passage. It was submitted six months ago, in August 2001. Through discussions with departmental officials, the Committee found out that there were problems in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The Committee told the officials that while Members were not happy, they did realise why the Department wanted their approval for accelerated passage.

We must be realistic, and we must establish what problems the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister had in this matter. Why have we waited six months for this Bill? With that in mind, my Committee Colleagues and I reluctantly support the motion to grant accelerated passage, but you can rest assured that we will examine the Bill — we will not forget about it simply because it will not go through Committee Stage. However, we will not be party to 1,800 people being disadvantaged due to mismanagement by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms McWilliams: As Sue Ramsey rightly stated, every member of the Committee registered enormous concern when told that the legislation would require accelerated passage. This is the first time that our Committee has been asked to accelerate legislation. We were presented with several options, and it is correct that the 1,740 residents could be disenfranchised. The difficulty is that the Social Security Agency would have to calculate each payment manually, because, as the Minister stated, on 7 April 2002 the computer system will be closed down. When the Executive decide on legislation in the future, I suggest that if they do not meet their deadlines, a Minister be tasked to do 1,740 calculations manually. That would be the impact of failing to process legislation on time. We could have chosen to do that, but parity would have been broken — not in the rates but by requesting extra staff. It would be an extra cost to the Department for Social Development to continue that work after the computer system stops in Northern Ireland, as it will do elsewhere.

1.45 pm

If the legislation had gone through the Committee, Members would have asked questions on it, so it is important that the Minister be given the opportunity to respond to those questions on the Floor. If £19 million was requested from the budget for the transfer from the Department for Social Development's budget to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's budget — plus a little over £2 million, making it £21

million in total — the concern is that that money would not necessarily be drawn down from the existing health and social services budget in future. That budget is under extreme pressure; all the budgets in the past year had easements or surrenders, but the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety surrendered only £4.3 million, which is a comparatively minimal amount. The Department is in no position to find this money internally. I hope that because this is a preserved rights issue, that money will be ringfenced and will not come out of current Departmental resources. I want the Minister to assure us of that, since we are giving accelerated passage to the Bill.

In response to Mr Morrow's points, every time that we are asked to give accelerated passage, all Members, particularly those who sit on the relevant Committee, should explain their reasons for supporting acceleration. I would be concerned if the Assembly were to simply give a nod to accelerated passage.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I have listened with interest to the debate thus far. When anyone calls a Sinn Féin Minister to account, it is noticeable that his speech is called a "rant". It has probably been noticed that the Member for West Belfast doth protest too much — she should stop crying. In fact, her bleating is false. Where is the Member who was so concerned about accelerated passage for the Social Security Fraud Bill — where is Gerry Kelly? He has disappeared. Sinn Féin has turned its policy on its head. I am sure that he was speaking with a good deal of authority, as he does when speaking for a breadth of organisations connected with IRA/Sinn Féin, when he said:

"I oppose the use of accelerated passage procedure,"

That is very clear: "I oppose it."

He added:

"... and I hope that others will do likewise."

That was a clear statement of opposition.

However, when accelerated passage is requested for a Bill that is supported by Sinn Féin and the Health Minister, that opposition goes away. My hon Friend Mr Morrow pointed out that there may be opposition only to the accelerated passage of the Social Security Fraud Bill — or does it go wider than that? We will find that out if Gerry Kelly appears before the end of the debate, or if he wants to oppose accelerated passage vigorously, or if Sinn Féin intends to vote against it. Once again there has been hypocrisy. Principle means absolutely nothing and is stood on its head when it suits the occasion.

It was pointed out before that it was not my hon Friend's wish to use accelerated passage as normal procedure for a Bill but that the Social Security Fraud Bill had to be tackled in that way because it dealt with

the serious matter of fraudulent activity throughout the Province.

Parity with the rest of the United Kingdom was established then, and I am glad that Sinn Féin is today stating that it wants parity with the rest of the United Kingdom. Sinn Féin can try to express that idea in another form of words, because it does not like to admit that it represents parity with the rest of the United Kingdom. It will be interesting to see whether Sinn Féin will admit that, even though those words seem to scorch the mouths of its members who utter them.

There is another serious matter. We have been told that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is sitting on Bills. That is a serious matter that must be tackled head-on. We have been told that the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Mr Blair, has many problems at home that must be addressed, and yet he tours the world. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have toured Brussels, toured America, toured everywhere, but they have not dealt with matters that are relevant at home. Therefore, it is not acceptable that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is impeding the progress of numerous Bills. I have heard that several other Bills have been stopped, because they are sitting on the desks of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

The reason for their impediment cannot be money, because many millions of pounds have been allocated. Its budget is almost as high as that for the entire Assembly, so the delay is not due to a lack of money. However, there seems to be a lack of will, and it is unacceptable that accelerated passage is being requested because of inaction by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. That issue must be scrutinised and the reasons must be smoked out. It must be brought out into the open.

I support the purpose of accelerated passage. It is important that there be parity with the rest of the United Kingdom and that our people should not be disadvantaged. However, Bills should not sit on the desks of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. They should be processed in a proper and urgent manner.

Ms de Brún: I thank Members for their interest. I will try to deal with all the issues raised.

First, the resource transfer has been confirmed for 2002-03 and 2003-04, and will be subject to the spending review process. I assure Members that I have no wish to ask the House to give a Bill accelerated passage. The circumstances of this Bill are exceptional, and I do not anticipate encountering them again.

During the debate, several Members referred to the circumstances of the delay. I want to give a fuller picture. On 9 August 2001, in the absence of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, I submitted the

policy document for this Bill to Sir Reg Empey and Mr Séamus Mallon for approval to submit it to the Executive. A reply giving me approval to proceed was issued on 17 September, conditional to further work being completed on the financial implications. It is important to note that that work had to be done and was one element of the cause of the delay. The additional work was not straightforward and involved liaison and agreement with the Department for Social Development on the transfer.

In view of the delays that had occurred since the policy document was first submitted, an additional paper was included with the revised policy document. That was resubmitted on 7 November, requesting approval to seek accelerated passage on the transfer of preserved rights cases to health and personal social services. Approval to prepare two Bills and to seek accelerated passage was received on 8 January. Approval to introduce the Bills to the House was sought from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Executive on 10 January. Approval from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy Minister was received on 30 January, and Executive approval was received on 7 February.

Due to the various delays and the need for further financial information, that is being brought to the Assembly much later than we anticipated. Therefore, to avoid the difficulties that I outlined, we are asking for accelerated passage today.

I hope that I have covered all the points that Members raised. I apologise if I have missed any question. My officials will scrutinise the record of the debate, and I will write to any Member whose question has not been answered or fully covered. I thank Members again for their interest in the issue and the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for its help and support in the matter.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Members will be aware that accelerated passage can be granted only by leave of the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 40(3), the Assembly grants accelerated passage to the Personal Social Services (Preserved Rights) Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Bill will receive its Second Stage tomorrow, Tuesday 19 February.

ASSEMBLY:

**ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND
INVESTMENT COMMITTEE**

Resolved:

That Mr Eugene McMennamin replace Mr Alex Attwood as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. — [Mr Tierney.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: By leave, the Assembly shall suspend until 2.30 pm, when we shall resume with questions to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

The sitting was suspended at 1.58 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

**FIRST MINISTER AND
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

Mr Speaker: I shall give advance notice that the first question to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will not be taken. Members may be aware that Mrs Nelis's husband has been seriously injured, and she is unable to attend today.

Single Equality Bill

1. **Mr Close** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if it intends to introduce a “publican’s defence” clause into the single equality Bill. (AQO 831/01)

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what assessment can it make in relation to the concerns raised by the Federation of Retail Licensed Trade and Northern Ireland Hotels Federation about their statutory duty to “preserve order” on their premises and about the draft single equality Bill; and to make a statement. (AQO 840/01)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): We wish to take question 1 and question 7 together.

No decisions have been taken as to what provisions will be included in the single equality Bill. A policy paper setting out our proposals will be issued for consultation by the end of the year. Many licensees contend that an exemption is needed in anti-discrimination law to protect them against claims of discrimination in which they state that they are acting to preserve order as required by licensing laws. We shall take those views into account when forming our proposals.

Mr Close: I am encouraged by that response. By way of assistance, I suggest that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister give serious consideration to including, in the single equality Bill, section 15(2) of the Equal Status Act 2000 in the South of Ireland. That might help to alleviate the problem.

Do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister recognise the need for some degree of mediation or arbitration to be facilitated when there is a dispute over admission, rather than it ending up in court, as happens at present? That is unsatisfactory and somewhat expensive.

The Deputy First Minister: The Member has asked us to consider section 15(2) of the Republic of Ireland's Equal Status Act 2000, which provides an exemption from anti-discrimination law for action taken by, or on behalf of, those who are licensed to sell alcohol when they are acting in good faith to ensure compliance with the licensing laws. The Republic of Ireland has a general provision, similar to that in our current legislation, which provides that nothing in the Equal Status Act 2000 shall be construed as prohibiting any action taken under any enactment. When forming our proposals, we shall consider the impact of the exemptions in the Republic and the experiences there.

The Member said that he was encouraged by my response. We shall take those issues into account. However, that will not predetermine our conclusions. I do not want anything to be misunderstood or misrepresented. It would be wrong for me to speculate on any measure that might be taken on mediation at this stage in advance of court action. However, we accept the Member's point.

Mr Beggs: Question 7.

Mr Speaker: The Minister has already made it clear that he is grouping questions 1 and 7 together, and has had leave to do so. This is your opportunity for a supplementary question — if you wish to take it.

Mr Beggs: That was a misunderstanding.

Does the Deputy First Minister acknowledge that members of the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation and the Federation of Retail Licensed Trade wish to ensure that no one would be discriminated on grounds of religion, sex, political opinion or disability, and does he acknowledge that there is concern at the number of weak cases supported by the Equality Commission? I understand that about 80% of such cases have been lost, and others have been settled out of court to avoid legal costs.

Will he advise the House what financial penalty exists for those who take costly legal cases without having supporting evidence?

The Deputy First Minister: We are aware of the representations that have been made by the licensed and hotel trades. As I have said, we shall consider all the relevant issues as we prepare the single equality Bill. However, I am not in a position to speculate on any issues pertaining to the Equality Commission's possible involvement, under the single equality Bill, in any cases that may be taken. We are looking at what the single equality Bill should provide for, and our focus should be on those legislative arrangements.

Mr Shannon: Will the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister accept that the proposed single equality Bill will put publicans under intense pressure to stop unruly elements from creating havoc

on their property? It should be made clear that publicans should have the right to bar anyone. For example, someone wearing a Celtic top who walks into a bar full of Rangers supporters could, and probably would, lead to a breach of the peace.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am referring to the Chamber, not to the job of publicans.

The Deputy First Minister: The Member's reference to the single equality Bill as it stands is somewhat erroneous. As has been indicated before in the House in answers from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the single equality Bill has not yet come before the House. In relation to the matters under discussion, we have to take account of the requirements under licensing legislation that publicans ensure good order on their premises. We want to be certain that we take care to ensure that there are no breaches of the peace. We also want to make sure that the single equality Bill will be effective as an equality measure and will provide for common sense legislation in respect of all other considerations.

Visit to West Tyrone

2. **Mr Hussey** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister plan to tour West Tyrone soon. (AQO 825/01)

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): We have no plans to make a joint tour of West Tyrone in the near future.

Mr Hussey: I am slightly disappointed. Should the First Minister decide to visit West Tyrone, he will find that Ulster Unionists there are focused on their Unionism, despite being the minority community in the west. Indeed, the First Minister should also know that, during any visits that I make to Ulster Unionist Party groups in West Tyrone, I and they do not waste our time discussing any form of united or agreed Ireland, as some others have suggested.

In the event of a visit to West Tyrone, will the First Minister give me an assurance that he will take time to address the concerns of groups representing victims of terrorism in the west? Republican terrorists are still actively targeting members of those groups.

The First Minister: I am glad to receive the assurance from the Member that in his branches and association, local Unionists are not discussing any form of united or agreed Ireland. I was astonished at the claim made by a leading member of the DUP that that was happening. I wonder whether he has any evidence, and whether he would care to produce it. I dare say it is like so many things that we hear from that quarter — assertions without evidence.

Victims' groups and individual victims from West Tyrone have played an important role in research recently carried out into service provision for victims. Officials from our Victims Unit have visited a number of victims' support groups in the area during the past year and assisted with a variety of issues. A capacity-building programme to help victims' groups increase their expertise in seeking and securing funding was recently completed, and several groups in the area participated.

On the question of the continuing targeting of individuals by paramilitary organisations, I am sure that Members will join with me in congratulating the police and security forces on their success in the neighbouring area of Coalisland this morning.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: I have noted with some concern in recent weeks that questions of a very open kind have been tabled concerning constituencies. The supplementaries to those questions seem to bear little relation to the constituency concerned, which must disappoint the constituents. However, there is another dilemma about such questions open to the constituency alone. If there are only two further supplementaries, I am in the invidious position of discriminating against some Members or parties from that constituency, and it is not the Speaker's place to do so.

I shall look carefully at the matter of open questions on constituencies, especially when they are not followed by supplementaries that are truly relevant. On this occasion, I shall permit all the parties that are represented in that constituency to have a supplementary question.

Mr Gibson: I am glad that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have no intention of touring the constituency of West Tyrone. They should now be aware of the insult that they delivered to the Unionist community last week when they both displayed Republican tactics by boycotting and abstaining from the vote on the provision of a memento for the primary schoolchildren of West Tyrone to mark the Golden Jubilee. Will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister take this opportunity to apologise?

Mr Speaker: Order. I rule the question out of order, since the Member clearly ignored what I expressly said.

Mr McMenamin: I assure the Speaker that my question is on a bread-and-butter issue. Given the high levels of unemployment in West Tyrone, can the Minister assure us that all industrialists — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McMenamin: May I start again, Mr Speaker? Given the high levels of unemployment in West Tyrone, can the Minister assure us that all industrialists who

are interested in setting up in Northern Ireland are being encouraged to visit West Tyrone, and that they are being given every incentive to locate there? I particularly refer to my home town of Strabane, which has been plagued with high levels of unemployment for years.

Mr Speaker: Order. That is a question for the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, as the First Minister appears to be ready with a response, I would hate to deprive him and the House of delivering it.

The First Minister: When questions of an open character are tabled, the Office looks around the horizon — from a West Tyrone perspective, in this case — to ensure that there are answers for likely questions. In this case we are similarly positioned. I have been informed by the IDB that it takes a keen interest in these issues, and 14 of the 16 inward investment projects initiated during 2000-01 were in New TSN areas.

Since April 1999, the IDB has introduced 36 potential investors to West Tyrone, and it has secured new inward investment courtesy of a £1.2 million project by Fabplus. The company will manufacture sprinkler systems in Strabane creating 30 jobs. I am sure the Member is familiar with the project. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is focused on that, and it is one of its principal concerns.

Mr P Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am pleased to be associated with the First Minister's rejection of the hollow claims made by the DUP. When the First and Deputy First Minister consider a visit to West Tyrone, will they seriously consider visiting Castlederg, which has a tense community relations problem that we are endeavouring to resolve? I feel that a visit from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister would go some way to helping to resolve that tension.

2.45 pm

The First Minister: I am familiar with Castlederg, having been there on several occasions. I am aware that, during the course of the troubles, the village of Castlederg has experienced a significant number of fatalities — of murders. I suspect that if that were calculated on a per capita of the population basis, Castlederg would emerge as one of the worst affected parts of Northern Ireland.

Against that background, I am not surprised that there are some feelings and tensions in the area. It is our hope that those tensions will be ameliorated as we see progress towards establishing a commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means, through the continued operation and success of this institution. In the long run, that holds the best hope for the entire community, including the people of Castlederg. We shall consider the matter that the Member has mentioned.

Mr McElduff: Further to that, I invite the Minister — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: This is an opportunity for the Member to put question 3, which stands in his name.

Irish Honours System

3. **Mr McElduff** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if it will consult with President Mary McAleese on an honours system that would be appropriate and fitting for Irish nationally-minded citizens. (AQO 843/01)

The Deputy First Minister: We have no plans to consult President McAleese on that issue.

Mr McElduff: I wish to record my great disappointment that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has consistently underplayed the North/South element of the Good Friday Agreement. I ask the Minister to work with President McAleese to ensure that the profile of the President's Award — the challenge to the young people of Ireland between the ages of 15 and 25 — is increased in the North, because the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is not doing anything to ameliorate the cold house for Nationalists in the North.

The Deputy First Minister: I reject any allegation that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is in any way undercommitted to North/South arrangements. On previous occasions, we have answered questions on the institutional format, and we have made it clear that we are committed to ensuring that the North/South arrangements work in a full and effective way across a range of issues. Those include looking at — as we did in the institutional format — extending areas that would come under formal co-operation and, therefore, the accountability mechanisms that attach to the North/South Ministerial Council. To develop matters in those ways hardly implies a lack of commitment.

The Irish Government have considered the matter of honours on several occasions, going back to 1930. It has always been felt that any honours system could be introduced only on a cross-party basis. It has been the subject of discussion in the Dáil, including during the current session, and the matter is one that the Government and other parties are addressing. An honours system, as such, is not a matter for the President, and I hope that the Member recognises the significance of article 40 of the Constitution of Ireland, because I certainly do.

With respect to any other issues, our Office remains open, positive and encouraging to anyone interested in promoting activities in, or participation from, Northern Ireland.

Mr Fee: I am speaking as an Irish nationally-minded citizen — that is honour enough in itself, and I seek no further reward or award. However, does the Minister agree that there is a place for a system to recognise the efforts of citizens on this island — their efforts to improve the quality of life and to create an egalitarian society — but that in the past some of those honours and award systems have been abused, and have been used solely to award the great and the good and the rich and the powerful? Any future system should recognise that even modest efforts by people throughout society provide a rich and powerful contribution to the cause of peace, prosperity and stability in the country.

The Deputy First Minister: The Republican and socialist tradition has been to oppose any system that might extend privilege or patronage. However, many people realise that it is appropriate to find ways to recognise contributions made to society. Many countries, including republics, have systems that recognise citizens' outstanding contributions and dedication.

Should the Irish Government introduce a system to recognise and reflect such contributions, many in the House and elsewhere would be happy to welcome that move. From another perspective, many people appreciate honours that are conferred differently.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Will the Minister take note of how many Irish nationally-minded citizens have been honoured by Her Majesty the Queen recently and have been glad to receive her honour?

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Deputy First Minister: I have no problem in noting that people have received honours under the British honour system, be they Nationalist-minded or Unionist-minded. They are entitled to accept or decline any honour offered to or conferred on them.

Executive Business

4. **Mr Ford** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on business transacted at the previous meeting of the Executive. (AQO 833/01)

The First Minister: The previous Executive meeting was held on 14 February 2002, and a copy of the press release issued following the meeting has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Mr Ford: I note the terse way in which the First Minister answered that question, given that a fortnight ago Mr Haughey refused to give any indication of business to be tabled for the next Executive meeting. I suppose the fact that the Executive have announced that a press release has been made available is something for which to be grateful.

Is the First Minister aware that anyone who can read English or Welsh can access the National Assembly for Wales web site and print out minutes of its Cabinet meetings? On 19 June 2001, in answer to a supplementary to my question about freedom of information, the then Deputy First Minister advised the Assembly that

“We are currently considering the most appropriate date to implement the Freedom of Information Act 2000 in the devolved Administration.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 11, Page 221*].

Will the Minister advise the House when something is going to be done about freedom of information and stop muttering platitudes?

The First Minister: I am happy to inform the Member that Northern Ireland will be included in the UK freedom of information legislation, and it will be implemented here. On Mr Ford’s general point, there is a need for confidentiality with regard to discussions in the Executive. The discussions regularly refer to policy issues, which would not be appropriate to publish.

A Member: Will the Minister comment on the Welsh situation?

The First Minister: I cannot comment on the discussions in Wales. Wales is an entirely different case as the extent of devolution is narrower there. It would be more to the point if a similar practice obtained in Cabinet discussions in London, Scotland or Dublin. That is not the case. The Member’s question is misconceived.

Mr O’Neill: In order to throw more light on the matter, can the First Minister outline the major issues that have come before the Executive since he and Mr Durkan took office in November?

The First Minister: Several major issues have come before us during recent weeks and months, and those are mainly in the public domain. One matter was mentioned in the rather terse press release that was issued last Thursday, which said that

“Ministers discussed ... the forthcoming spending review.”

It is difficult to conceive of an issue of greater importance to the Assembly and all the Departments. The spending review 2002, which will culminate in whatever decisions the Chancellor makes in the summer, is crucial. The Assembly would regard the Executive as highly remiss if they did not consider the matter, the approaches that they will make and the preparations for it. Moreover, the Assembly would regard the Executive as extremely foolish if they were to consider those matters in the full glare of publicity.

Mr S Wilson: Will the First Minister tell us whether the Executive, having met on 14 February, two days after the Secretary of State called for Sinn Féin to join the Northern Ireland Policing Board, discussed the aforementioned issue? Does he agree that the absence of Sinn Féin from the Policing Board has enabled

discussions to proceed without the poison that that party normally injects into public bodies, which makes it hard to reach resolutions on difficult issues? Will he tell the House whether he agrees with the call from the Irish Prime Minister that further concessions should be given to Sinn Féin to entice its members on to the Policing Board?

The First Minister: I am not sure if the Member’s last point is accurate, but I dare say he would not allow the detail of what was or was not said to interfere with his comments.

Of course the Policing Board was not discussed at the Executive’s meeting. The Executive discuss Executive business, which relates primarily to matters that are devolved to the Assembly. As the Member mentioned the matter, I am sure that, like most people in Northern Ireland, he is pleased both with the way in which the Policing Board has operated so far and with the broad party consensus that exists on it among the Member’s party, the SDLP and my party. We all congratulate the DUP on the positive role that it has played and lament the fact that it has not been equally positive elsewhere.

Use of Executive Office in Brussels

5. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister how it intends to utilise the Executive Office in Brussels to assist Assembly Members and Statutory Committees in their business. (AQO 834/01)

The Deputy First Minister: The new office in Brussels is a valuable resource, not only for the Executive but for Northern Ireland as a whole, and its facilities should be available to a broad range of interests. Specifically, the Brussels office will assist Assembly Committees in conducting inquiries that have a European dimension.

To date, the Committee for Enterprise Trade and Investment, the Committee of the Centre and the Committee for Regional Development have used the office during visits to Brussels. Officials based in the office assisted those Committees by arranging meetings with relevant contacts in Brussels and by providing advice on the organisation of the visits. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has approached the office about a further visit in the spring, and the Brussels office will welcome any other Statutory Committee that wishes to visit. The office will also assist Committees by providing factual information on request about European Union institutions, procedures, policies and laws. Individual Members who visit Brussels may wish to contact the office for advice and information about the facilities available.

Mr Armstrong: It is good to see that so many Committees have been using the office. Are there any

plans for the Agriculture Committee to use it? We all know how important agriculture is to the Province, and I would welcome the Committee's having an opportunity to use the office.

The Deputy First Minister: I mentioned the Committees that have already been in contact with the office. They have either already used it or are planning to do so. The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development was not one of those that I mentioned. The Committee must determine whether it wants to visit Brussels, and, if so, whether it wants to avail itself of the useful facilities that the office provides.

Mr C Murphy: In the run-up to the establishment of the office in Brussels did the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have any contact with the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe? I understand that it did not. If that and various other reports on the office are examples of its networking abilities, it could become a costly and futile initiative.

3.00 pm

The Deputy First Minister: The Northern Ireland Centre in Europe ceased to operate in Brussels some time ago, which I regret. It would have been helpful to see a more seemly transition between the arrangements that the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe was providing and the current arrangements through the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels.

We now need to progress on that basis, to maximise the potential benefits of the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Europe and also to maximise the effectiveness of our dealings with European issues here. The Executive and a range of Departments are dealing with European issues in a detailed and technical manner, and we must also involve other local groups and interests. The Northern Ireland Centre in Europe can contribute to that.

Mr Speaker: I regret that some Members were unable to put further questions today, owing to a particularly large number of questions, including supplementary questions. The time for questions to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is up.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Mr Speaker: There will now be questions to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. I remind the House that question No 1, in the name of Mrs Nelis, has been withdrawn. She cannot be present today as her husband has experienced an accident.

Cultural Heritage of East Belfast

2. **Dr Adamson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps have been taken by his

Department to preserve and protect the cultural heritage of East Belfast. (AQO 829/01)

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClelland] in the Chair)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I want to begin by acknowledging the rich and diverse range of cultural heritage in East Belfast such as its world-famous shipbuilding heritage, HMS Caroline, Craigavon House, and the great writer CS Lewis — to name but a few. The preservation and protection of the area's cultural heritage are matters for bodies from both the public and independent sectors. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's primary role is to provide jointly, with the Department of the Environment, the strategic framework for the preservation of the cultural heritage of the whole of Northern Ireland. At a local level, the cultural forum that my Department established to bring together a range of relevant public bodies has already provided direct assistance to district councils preparing cultural strategies in the context of local integrated plans.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. It is difficult to hear the Minister over the conversations that are taking place in the Chamber.

Mr McGimpsey: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is working with the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland and Belfast Industrial Heritage, among others, to preserve and promote East Belfast's unique industrial heritage through the creation of a museum of sea and sky. The Titanic will be one of the key themes. The Department of the Environment has already listed some of the historic buildings and dock installations in the area known as Titanic Quarter. I hope that East Belfast will play a full role in the Imagine Belfast bid for the city to be named European City of Culture 2008, which has received significant funding from my Department. The competition closes next month, and Belfast has a strong case.

Dr Adamson: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply. However, is he aware of public concern over the disposal of Ormiston House, the home of Viscount William James Pirrie, who built the Titanic, of Little Lea, the boyhood home of CS Lewis, and of Cabin Hill, where the first Northern Ireland Cabinet met? Is he fully aware of the proposed development of the Cherryvalley nursery, which threatens the whole river corridor in that historic area? Will he bring his considerable influence to bear on the requisite authorities to ensure that public concerns on those issues are finally allayed?

Mr McGimpsey: I am aware of some of those issues. However, preservation of historic buildings, such as Ormiston House and Cabin Hill, is outside my remit. Those are listed buildings under the Environment and Heritage Service, which is a section of the Department

of the Environment. Protection of those buildings would therefore be its responsibility.

My Department could, however, become involved in the future use of those houses in a heritage role, it that were proposed. As things stand, the matters that the Member mentioned are primarily for the Department of the Environment, the Planning Service and the Environment and Heritage Service.

River Bush Salmon Stocks

3. **Mr Kane** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he is taking to increase salmon stocks in the River Bush. (AQO 851/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Department has been aware for some time of concerns over the decreased number of salmon returning to the river as a result of the reduction in the numbers of adult fish returning to spawn in the river. That reflects a general trend of falling stocks across the north Atlantic.

Several measures have been pursued in the last few years to increase stocks, and more are planned this year. First, the river will be stocked annually with hatchery-reared smolts. Those ranch salmon provide good angling on the lower stretches of the river, although they are not allowed to migrate upstream to spawn, as they may detrimentally affect the international salmon research project that is being undertaken on the river.

Secondly, a programme of increased in-river stocking with hatchery-reared salmon fry and parr is scheduled to commence in spring 2002. That will yield increased numbers of smolts going to sea, which should increase the number of adult fish returning to the river.

Thirdly, the marine survival of salmon is a major concern. To help to address that locally, I recently obtained £1.5 million from the Executive programme fund for a voluntary scheme to buy out coastal commercial salmon netting entitlements. That should increase the number of adult fish returning to Northern Ireland river systems, including the River Bush.

Finally, a river warden has been recruited specifically for the River Bush to tackle poaching problems and to assist in upgrading habitat to provide additional spawning opportunities for returning fish. Those measures show that the Department is implementing major measures to increase stocks in the River Bush.

Mr Kane: Are the interests of tourism, the River Bush or anglers served by scientists continuing to develop fin clip numbers between Bushmills hatchery and the river mouth, whilst continuing to neglect the restocking of the river to any significant degree by introducing wild salmon fry?

In 1983-84, wild salmon stocks in the River Bush were at a record low. Could the actions that were taken

to correct the situation then be employed now, as stocks are at an all-time low, just as they were in 1983?

Mr McGimpsey: Although I do not have the exact figures for 1983, I know that stocks, particularly wild salmon, are declining. Several measures are in place to try to address that, of which buying up nets is one. The continuous angling development programme, which follows on from the salmon enhancement programme, is designed specifically to carry out improvements in the habitat. The salmon management plan, a scientific programme that sets spawning targets in the catchment area to ensure that the spawning levels are maintained, is a further relevant measure. There are also restrictions on exploitation.

Bag limits have been introduced. From 1 June 2002 until the end of the season, a limit of two fish a day will be permitted. Prior to that, all fish caught will be returned. I mentioned the role of the warden on the river. There is also the River Bush project, which is an internationally-renowned scientific project to examine the marine survival of salmon. The River Bush is used as an index river in that project. A great deal of work is ongoing.

Those measures are designed to address a combination of factors, which means that wild salmon stocks are reducing. It is estimated that they have reduced by around 50%. That fills us with concern, and we want to address the matter. However, the unknown factor of the ability of salmon to survive in the north Atlantic is outside our control. Evidence suggests that matters such as temperature increases and pollution are also having a seriously adverse effect.

Mr Leslie: I welcome the Minister's initiative to support the salmon population. He will be aware that a slurry or silage effluent spill can undo much good work with one blow. Several technological advances have been made in the reprocessing of farm waste. Would the Minister's Department support initiatives advanced by the farming community to introduce some of those methods in Northern Ireland?

Mr McGimpsey: The short answer is yes. It is no secret that pollution presents a major problem, not only in the numbers of fish that are killed but in the damage that it causes to the habitat. The Department would support all reasonable measures proposed by the farming industry or by any sector to deal with slurry waste entering and polluting the river systems.

On a positive note, no fish were killed in the River Bush last year. However, as Mr Leslie is aware, other rivers were not so fortunate.

Darts

4. **Mr Close** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQO 399/00 and AQO 420/01, to

give an update on plans by the NI Sports Council to recognise darts as a sport. (AQO 848/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council's officers' recognition panel met on 3 December 2001 and reaffirmed previous decisions that darts is not an activity that they wish to formally recognise as a sport. I refer the Member to the answer given to AQO 420/01 on 26 November 2001, and repeat that darts has not so far been recognised as a sport, on the grounds that it involves insufficient physical activity. Recognition per se would not lead to funding; it would simply allow access to funding. In the circumstances, I suggest that funding by sponsorship should be pursued.

Mr Close: Through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and in the immortal words of John McEnroe "you cannot be serious". The Minister rightly defined sport as "all forms of physical activity". Does he not agree that darts, insofar as it concerns the body as opposed to the mind or the spirit, relates to throwing, which is a physical exercise. In some games a ball is thrown; a punch is thrown in boxing, and those are recognised sports. Dart players throw darts. Should the Minister not take up this discriminatory ruling and pursue it with the full vigour of his office to ensure that those who participate in the worthy sport of darts — tens of thousands of players in Northern Ireland — get the recognition that they duly deserve? In so doing, he might request action —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Close, you come very close to making a speech.

Mr Close: My earlier question referred to equality and discrimination. Surely to goodness the Minister would not wish to see action taken through the equality Bill?

Mr McGimpsey: It is not the first time that the Assembly has heard Mr Close's impassioned plea on behalf of darts. I could throw "You cannot be serious" back to him.

Mr Close: Would that be a physical throw?

Mr McGimpsey: Or a rhetorical one, whichever Mr Close wishes. I appreciate the case that he makes, but it is out of my hands. The sports councils of Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales come together and determine whether a sport is recognised. They have met several times to discuss the issue of darts, and each time, darts has been recognised as a game, a pastime or a hobby — but not as a sport. The game is played in any pub in the land and it is enjoyed by many. However, the central thrust seems to be that a sport has access to lottery funding. I reiterate that an activity's recognition as a sport does not guarantee its funding. There are other criteria, not least of which are sporting priorities.

3.15 pm

However, there are other avenues of funding to pursue. It would be wrong of me to ask the Sports Council to

skew the criteria that it uses to define a sport — that is to say as a sufficient physical activity — in order to allow darts access to another funding stream. Sponsorship from brewery companies is a ready source of funding.

Tobacco Advertising and Sponsorship in Motorcycling

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (a) his policy on the use of tobacco advertising and sponsorship in motorcycling; and (b) any discussions he has had with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on the issue. (AQO 849/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Ideally, I would like tobacco advertising and sponsorship of motorcycling to be eliminated. However, I recognise that the sport needs that advertising and sponsorship to survive. Unfortunately, alternative sponsorship is rare, and that is why motorcycle sport continues to rely almost exclusively on tobacco sponsorship.

Responsibility for any decision to ban or restrict tobacco advertising and sponsorship in sport lies with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Although I have not had any discussions with Minister de Brún, I know that a private Member's Bill that will extend to Northern Ireland is moving through the legislative process.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister's acceptance of tobacco sponsorship and his dealings with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety disappoint me. I specifically mentioned motorcycling because of that sport's recent acceptance of sponsorship from the tobacco industry. My concern applies to all sports that accept sponsorship from that source.

Does the Minister agree that, in view of the 3,000-plus deaths in Northern Ireland from tobacco-related illnesses and the enormous unnecessary costs to the Health Service — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There is a good deal of background conversation, which makes it difficult for me to hear the Member. I remind Members that, if they wish to hold a prolonged conversation, there are many other rooms in the Building.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Minister agree that, in view of the 3,000-plus smoking-related deaths in Northern Ireland and the enormous unnecessary cost to the Health Service, his Department should take remedial measures to stop the promotion of tobacco and other health-damaging products during sporting activities?

Mr McGimpsey: Tobacco sponsorship has all but disappeared, and motorcycling is the last sport to avail of it. I would support a ban on tobacco advertising, provided that there were some lead-in time to allow

the sport to seek alternative funding. As things stand, if a ban were introduced tomorrow, that would have a major effect on motorbike racing; for example, short-circuit motorbike racing would face great difficulties and could disappear.

The Westminster Government introduced a Bill to ban all tobacco advertisement and sponsorship by July 2003. That Bill was overtaken by the general election. However, the private Member's Bill, which replicates the Government's Bill, is working its way through Westminster. It will set a deadline of October 2006 for the ban of all tobacco advertising.

The Government's original Bill had derogations for snooker and Formula 1 racing. We do not have Formula 1 racing in Northern Ireland, and little snooker is played. The private Member's Bill would end the derogations. Therefore, the Member has referred to a process that is already under way and that may take care of the problem that he identified. If it does not, the issue can be debated again in the House. However, it is a matter for central legislation. It is important to have a standardised means of addressing such issues in the United Kingdom.

I would support — and I doubt whether anyone in the House would oppose — such a ban.

Mr Dallat: I have been a reformed smoker for some 20 years. Does the Minister agree that cigarette sponsorship of any sport undermines the campaign to improve the health of our citizens? Will he ensure that the Westminster legislation is relayed to the Assembly so that it can lend its support to that initiative?

Mr McGimpsey: I am happy to circulate the details of the proposed legislation to Members.

European Football Championship 2008

6. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any discussions he has had with his counterparts in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland regarding a joint bid to host the European football championship in 2008. (AQO 850/01)

Mr McGimpsey: There has been no formal contact with either Scotland or the Republic of Ireland at ministerial level on this issue. This is a matter for the football authorities concerned, and the Irish Football Association (IFA) has consistently indicated that it has no plans to seek involvement in a joint bid because of the lack of suitable facilities. Given those circumstances, it would have been inappropriate for me to intervene.

The establishment of a national stadium is a key issue that is central to such a bid and to the development of a soccer strategy in Northern Ireland. Following the end of the strategy's consultation period on 31 January, I will consider the issue more closely with the other sports that may be involved.

Mr Ford: It is disappointing that nothing is happening at this stage. Does the 2008 championship not represent what is possibly the last opportunity to get a national stadium under way in Northern Ireland? Given the affection that Members on the Minister's side of the House have for Scotland, and the affection that Members on the other side of the House have for the Republic — although some follow Glasgow Celtic — is it not time that we made the most of the opportunity to join with the bid that is being submitted by the two other football associations?

Mr McGimpsey: First, I do not regard this as the last chance to establish a national stadium. It would not be right to expend considerable sums of money and resources that we do not have simply to race to join in with a soccer tournament. The IFA is football's governing body, and this matter is its responsibility. The Scottish Football Association (SFA) approached the IFA, which stated that it was unable to make a joint bid because it did not have the adequate facilities.

The criteria for the bid must also be considered. Eight stadiums, each with 30,000 seats, are required. Scotland would provide six stadiums; it already has four stadiums and it will upgrade a further two. The Irish Republic, which is joining the bid, would provide two stadiums. The last date for joining the bid is the end of February, so the timescale has been too tight. In addition to that, while I do not wish the bid to fail, there is no guarantee that the joint bid by Scotland and the Irish Republic will succeed in 2008. They face stiff competition.

This opportunity will arise every four years. We will become better informed as to how to make progress through the process of considering the establishment of stadiums, the soccer strategy, and the needs of other sports, whose strategies will help us to determine their needs. A substantial investment would be needed. A brand-new 30,000-seater stadium would cost some £60 million. The cost of land and site works, and running costs of about £2 million a year would be added to that. The refurbishment of the existing Windsor Park and support for other existing stadiums would be a much cheaper option.

We must ask the sports involved whether this is how they would want us to spend £60 million. Refurbishment seems to be the best way to achieve such facilities at the lowest cost, while dealing with the needs of the sports involved. This matter involves football, but it also concerns rugby, Gaelic football and athletics. Those sports' long-term needs must also be addressed.

Mr O'Neill: The Minister's answer was so thorough that I will have to change my supplementary question. In the light of the difficulties that the Department is facing, and as a goodwill gesture, will the Minister consider inviting the increasingly successful Republic of Ireland World Cup team on a courtesy visit to

Northern Ireland to promote some of the work that we are trying to achieve through the soccer strategy?

Mr McGimpsey: Such invitations are a matter for the Irish Football Association (IFA), but I will certainly take the suggestion on board and will discuss that matter with the IFA. The IFA is constantly looking for international teams to visit Belfast. The facilities at Windsor Park preclude some teams from playing here, but the hosting of major international matches at Windsor Park is the best and surest way to ensure that the Northern Ireland team reaches the required standard to take part in the next Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) European championships in 2004.

Mr B Hutchinson: Can the Minister confirm that last week a spokesman for the IFA gave a frosty reception to any suggestion of involving the IFA? Can he also confirm that UEFA's rules clearly state that it will not accept a bid from more than two countries?

Mr McGimpsey: I am not aware of any such statement from the IFA. However, I can confirm that the IFA indicated to the Scottish Football Association that an expression of interest would be forthcoming, but that the IFA was not able to go forward because it considered the prospect of participating in a joint bid to be impractical due to the lack of appropriate facilities. If my understanding of the situation is wrong, I will try to find out more and write to the Member on the matter.

I do not believe that there is any limit on the number of partners in a bid. There can be more than two — in fact, UEFA was looking for partnership bids rather than single-country bids. I understand that one of the strongest bids being put forward for the 2004 rounds comes from Scandinavia, which includes Denmark, Sweden and Norway in a joint bid.

Mr Shannon: Does the Minister agree that Windsor Park can continue to be the national stadium, and that the soccer strategy that is being presented for consideration by the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department should be in place before any new national stadium goes ahead?

Mr McGimpsey: I agree. The football and Gaelic sports strategies are being finalised, and we must also examine the strategies for rugby, athletics and other interested sports. There is no reason to rule out the redevelopment of Windsor Park. The resource implications of such matters must be considered, and it is a question of whether it will be more cost-effective to invest in the refurbishment of existing facilities to bring them up to the required standard or to build new facilities — I have given you a flavour of the amount of money that that will involve. The redevelopment of existing sites will probably be a much cheaper option, but that matter will be finalised later.

Townland Names

7. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has any plans to include townland names on all correspondence emanating from his Department.
(AQO 845/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My officials are encouraged to reply to correspondence using the address supplied by the correspondent. Townland names are a valuable element of our rich cultural and linguistic heritage; and I welcome their use in addresses, along with the postcode and, where appropriate, the road name. My Department is also taking specific steps to protect and promote the important cultural and linguistic heritage preserved in our townlands.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Minister for his commitment to the promotion of townland names. Does he agree that it is reasonable to expect the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to take the lead in a major campaign aimed at promoting townland names? Will the Department incorporate in all official correspondence the name of the townland in which its headquarters at Interpoint is located?

Mr McGimpsey: My Department is taking significant steps to safeguard and strengthen that aspect of our cultural and linguistic heritage.

3.30 pm

One example is the common address file — an initiative from the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland, which is part of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. It is looking at a standardised form of address for Government and the private sector, which will include townland names. We have received a successful bid for £1 million of funding through Executive programme funds to advance that scheme, which will mean that every address will be re-united with its townland name. That will happen; the next step is to collect the address data. It is important to recognise that townland names have never disappeared — they are detailed on Ordnance Survey maps, depending on the size of the map. The common address file will ensure that townland names are on standardised forms of addresses in future.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister agree that one of the greatest obstacles to the retention of our townland names is the Post Office policy of giving preference to road names, a policy which is driven by the interests of big business and its narrow, selfish interests? Will his Department use its influence to have the Post Office change its policy, and take on board the concerns of local communities?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must ask you to be brief, Minister.

Mr McGimpsey: I readily agree that the introduction of road names by the Post Office was the biggest threat to the common usage of townland names, but I do not agree that it was to do with big business. As I said in my answer to Mr McElduff, a standardised form of address, including townland names, is coming on board through the common address file in the near future.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

BSE-Contaminated Tissue

1. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm that all possible measures have been taken to prevent BSE-contaminated tissue from entering the food chain; and to make a statement.

(AQO 852/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): Members will be aware that no bovine animal of more than 30 months of age enters the human food chain. Regarding animals under 30 months of age, which pass both anti- and post-mortem examinations, all tissues that could potentially be infected with the BSE agent are removed. The Specified Risk Material Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997, as amended, requires that all bovine tissues — otherwise known as specified risk material — that could potentially harbour the BSE agent are removed as soon as is reasonably practicable after the slaughter of the animal, immediately stained blue, and disposed off by rendering or by incineration at approved premises. All carcasses for human consumption, including imported carcasses, are inspected by departmental staff to ensure that all specified risk material has been removed.

The Department and the Food Standards Agency place a high emphasis on the controls in this area of work. We regularly carry out audits in meat plants to ensure that all best practices are being followed. The results of those audits, which are published monthly in the UK BSE bulletin, give us a high level of confidence that specified risk material is being properly disposed of and is unable to enter the food chain.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. Does she agree that maximum consumer confidence in food safety standards must be the priority, both in food production and distribution? What other measures might be in place to protect the consumer?

Ms Rodgers: I fully recognise the importance of consumer confidence to the agrifood industry. However, we cannot expect to gain that confidence without securing the safety of our food. As far as beef is concerned, no bovine animal of more than 30 months of age is permitted to enter the human food chain. That measure

ensures that cattle that show no sign of BSE, but which may be incubating the disease, cannot enter the food chain. In addition, all specified risk material — brain, spinal cord, et cetera — is removed from all bovine carcasses. The over-30-month scheme exists to ensure the safe removal of all parts of bovines of more than 30 months of age from the food chain, in case of early incubation.

Rural Development Programme: EU Moneys

2. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how the EU moneys redirected to the rural development programme's "modulation money" will be spent, and who will benefit.

(AQO 863/01)

Ms Rodgers: As required under EU Council regulation 1259/99, funds raised by the application of modulation can be deployed only for the purposes of agrienvironment, forestation of our agriculture land, farmer early retirement or less-favoured area (LFA) support measures. There is also a requirement that expenditure of those moneys must be confined to new recipients or schemes. Therefore, in the Northern Ireland rural development regulation plan, modulation funds have been devoted entirely to agrienvironmental measures and grants for the forestation of agriculture land. The beneficiaries are landowners or farmers with a long-term lease.

Some of the projected receipts for modulation have yet to be allocated under the rural development regulation plan, but current EU rules dictate that farmers and landowners will receive those moneys too.

Mr Molloy: Can a region decide what the money will be used for? Very few farmers have entered the countryside management scheme, because they do not see themselves simply as images for tourism through managing the hedgerows. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has devoted many staff and a great deal of administration costs to the scheme. What direct benefit will result for farmers who are deprived now?

Ms Rodgers: Regions can decide within the confines of the allowed measures, to which I have already referred. They are forestation, the early retirement scheme, agrienvironment measures and area support measures as well as the non-accompanying measures, which are allowed for match funding. However, it can be done on a regional basis within those parameters.

As I have already stated, all of the money goes to the farmers. Europe is looking towards the environment and moving to the second pillar of the common agricultural policy (CAP), which largely relates to diversification projects and the environment. It would be foolish for people to put their heads in the sand. The Department has taken great care to ensure that farmers

are trained, informed and in a position to benefit from those agrienvironment measures, including countryside management, and I am pleased to confirm uptake for those schemes.

Dairy Farmers

3. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what actions she has taken to alleviate the serious problems faced by dairy farmers who have suffered low refunds from the EU on dairy products. (AQO 826/01)

Ms Rodgers: The purpose of export refunds is to encourage exports by compensating processors of dairy products for the higher cost of using EU-sourced raw materials under the common agricultural policy.

When world dairy commodity markets declined in 2001, my officials and I worked hard to secure increases at the EU Milk and Milk Products Management Committee meetings. I also raised the matter with Margaret Beckett, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I impressed on her the need to put pressure on the EU Commission to secure an increase in export refunds. Moreover, in advance of the crucial EU Management Committee meeting on 24 January, I ensured that Commissioner Fischler was made aware of the importance of that matter for Northern Ireland.

Export refunds for skimmed milk powder have increased from zero on 1 November 2001 to 300 euro a ton at present. I shall continue to review the market situation in conjunction with the dairy industry.

Mrs I Robinson: I thank the Minister for her response. Does she agree that the move, although welcome as a step in the right direction, is still not enough to alleviate the serious situation that is developing in Northern Ireland's dairy farming sector? Does she agree that a further rise is needed at the Committee's next meeting? Does the Minister accept that the dairy farming industry in Northern Ireland, which generates upwards of £600 million a year and a further £70 million in VAT for the local economy, as well as employing approximately 13,000 people, deserves to receive better treatment from the EU and better export refunds for their products?

Ms Rodgers: At the United Dairy Farmer's milk auction last week, I noted that there have been further falls in prices. The indications from the dairy industry are that the fall in prices would have been more severe if we had not secured increases in the export refunds. However, it is disappointing that those have not had a more positive impact on the market. I agree with the Member that it would be useful if we could get additional funding. I have asked my officials to review the market information with the industry, with a view to pressing for further increases in export refunds at future

meetings of the EU Milk and Milk Products Management Committee.

I have also supported measures to help to strengthen the market. For example, private storage aid for butterfat was brought forward by two weeks at the beginning of March. That is the first time that that has happened for 10 years. Furthermore, the minimum incorporation rate for subsidised skimmed milk powder used in animal feed increased to 50% on 1 January. Both of those measures have been helpful.

Mr Douglas: Does the Minister agree that to achieve improved export refunds for Northern Ireland's dairy sector, we need enthusiastic support from Margaret Beckett, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs? Is enthusiastic support forthcoming?

Ms Rodgers: As I have already stated, I made clear to Mrs Beckett the position in Northern Ireland at the ministerial meeting before the previous Management Committee meeting. I made the case strongly to her on behalf of the Northern Ireland industry. I am pleased to say that Mrs Beckett took it fully on board. At the Management Committee, the case for Northern Ireland was advanced by Mrs Beckett. She was supportive in that situation. That is how we managed to get the previous rise. I may have to press for another rise in the future if the situation deteriorates, but I shall do that in discussion with the industry and by talking again to Mrs Beckett.

Vision Document

4. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many responses have been received to the consultation process on the vision document; and to make a statement. (AQO 856/01)

Ms Rodgers: A total of 81 written responses was received by the closing date for consultation. I have been most encouraged by the response to the consultation exercise. The conference in November was well attended, and I have held 27 bilateral meetings with key industry stakeholders. My Department is currently engaged in analysing the vision report and the responses to it.

Ms Lewsley: I too welcome the numbers of responses to the vision report. What is the timescale for the implementation of that report?

Ms Rodgers: I shall need time to consider the report and the results of the consultation exercise. I shall also require time to have discussions with my Executive Colleagues, other Departments and the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. I aim to produce an action plan in the summer. However, some recommendations that have widespread support and that are affordable within existing provision may be implemented earlier. For example, we may be able to move on areas

such as information technology and communications technology; training; animal and plant health; agrifood and the supply chain; the environment; representation of the interests of Northern Ireland; and the food body, before we come to the action plan areas in which we are already engaged.

Milk Prices

5. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what her assessment is on the effect that milk quota transferred from the UK is having on the current milk prices in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 827/01)

Ms Rodgers: The transfer of wholesale milk quota between regions of the United Kingdom has been permissible only since 1 April 1993. In the interim, Northern Ireland has benefited from the revised arrangements, with the net quota transferred to Northern Ireland each year ranging between 13 million and 63 million litres. That has helped to improve the structure of dairy farms in Northern Ireland. It has not had any adverse impact on the prices paid to producers for their milk.

A reduction in the prices received by producers in recent years has stemmed first from the strength of sterling, which has been acknowledged by the payment of agrimonetary compensation to dairy farmers in 2000 and again in 2001.

3.45 pm

The sector has recently faced a weakening of the international markets on which the Northern Ireland industry relies heavily, and there have also been reductions in export refunds. My officials and I have been working hard to secure an increase in export refunds in the hope that that will improve prices paid to consumers.

Mr Bradley: I thank the Minister for the depth of her reply. Would dairy farmers be better off if they had not purchased milk quota from GB?

Ms Rodgers: Farmers who decided to purchase milk quota did so to help improve the structure of their farm business and farm income from the point of view of scale. Had they not done so, their businesses would not have remained viable. The additional quota has also benefited the milk-processing sector by maintaining and generating employment, and by enabling the sector to use its assets more efficiently. On the whole it has been beneficial, and we are not any worse off for having the additional milk quota.

Twenty-Day Livestock Movement Standstill

6. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she expects to relax the 20-day livestock movement standstill. (AQO 828/01)

Ms Rodgers: I draw the Member's attention to the changes that I have made, which became effective from 4 February 2002. The holding standstill no longer applies to cattle and pigs — and moved-in cattle and pigs will be subject to a 30-day standstill. Other cattle and pigs in the herd will no longer be subjected to a standstill period. The current 20-day standstill period for sheep will continue to apply to the entire holding.

Although I am content with veterinary advice that the risk of disease in cattle and pigs in Northern Ireland is now low, it would be prudent to maintain existing foot-and-mouth disease controls on sheep until after the stress of lambing, when the position will be reviewed.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister agree that the 30-day standstill period on individual animals currently in place could be lower and would still have the effect of reducing the number of notifiable disease cases? It could also reduce the number of tuberculosis and brucellosis cases in Northern Ireland. That would reduce the amount of compensation paid, and would also make the Northern Ireland farmer more health conscious.

Ms Rodgers: The 30-day standstill period for the movement of cattle and pigs reflects the residency period for intracommunity trade. It is necessary to reflect the shared desire in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to control the spread of a range of animal diseases. Some animal diseases — unlike foot-and-mouth disease — have a 30-day incubation period. That is the reason for the 30-day standstill requirement.

Value-Added Dairy Products

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how she is encouraging the development of value-added dairy products in Northern Ireland. (AQO 855/01)

Ms Rodgers: Although the Northern Ireland dairy industry makes an important contribution to the agrifood industry, it is heavily reliant on the export of dairy products. Therefore, in order to enhance future prosperity, it is vital that the industry focuses on the development of high value-added dairy products. To this end my Department has supported several projects under the EU processing and marketing grant scheme to develop high value-added products.

Food technologists from Loughry College continue to work with a wide range of processing businesses in the dairy sector to identify and take advantage of niche market and other market opportunities through the development of new milk drinks, cheeses and cream products. Specialist training is provided to those engaged in the development of value-added products, and scientific research is also carried out with industry groups.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister acknowledge that, during the period of direct rule, the Northern Ireland Office was, to a degree, negligent in its failure to address the overreliance of the milk sector, on milk powder in particular? Does she agree that, although intervention and funding from the state can play a role in the short term, developing value-added products with alternative uses, which will increase dairy farmers incomes, will be vital in the long term?

Ms Rodgers: I do not wish to comment on the period of direct rule. I had no responsibility for that, and it is a matter of opinion. There is now a need to restructure the industry and to take whatever steps we can to assist it, including processing and marketing grants that help develop those products. The industry accepts the need for structural change in the long term, with more emphasis being placed on value-added products, and possibly some rationalisation, in order to build economies of scale.

Although public money cannot be spent in order to achieve rationalisation, assistance can be made available to support investment in value-added production. That is an area on which we are already focusing, and on which we shall continue to focus.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that the setting up of co-operatives is one way to encourage the development of value-added products? Is that provided for in her plans for the future of the agrifood industry?

Ms Rodgers: The vision report encourages the coming together of various parts of the food chain to develop horizontal and vertical links. My Department provides financial and technical assistance for the establishment of co-operatives by producers, including those that are intended to help to add value to primary production. I have recently had meetings with one sector of the industry that is attempting to do that. In addition, the mushroom sector has come together in order to achieve better results. I am anxious to assist and enhance any proposal made by the industry, and to facilitate it on the basis of encouraging the co-operation that is proposed in the vision report.

CAP Reform

8. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions have taken place on CAP reform (a) within Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; (b) within Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales; and (c) with the British Government; and to make a statement. (AQO 862/01)

Ms Rodgers: I have had several recent discussions on CAP reform in Ireland and Great Britain. In late January, I met Joe Walsh, the Republic's Minister for Agriculture, Food and Rural Environment, at the North/South Ministerial Council agriculture sectoral meeting

and confirmed with him that our priority should be the protection of the ability to export to Third World countries, and the retention of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) blue box exemptions for direct payments to farmers.

Early last week, I met with my Scottish and Welsh counterparts in Edinburgh. Later in the week, we met the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Margaret Beckett, in London. Those discussions covered our approach to the mid-term review of the Agenda 2000 agreement. My negotiating stance in those discussions is that, although there are valid reasons for reform, we must endeavour to ensure that reform is on a scale and at a pace that does not put unacceptable pressure on farmers and their families, or that causes difficulties for the viability of the rural economy.

Dr McDonnell: In the context of the expansion of the European Union and the consequent pressures that may arise, will the Minister expand further on what she has outlined on reform and related issues? With regard to agriculture, how shall we be affected by the expansion of the European Union?

Ms Rodgers: There are valid arguments for reform, including the competitiveness of European Union products, environmental concerns, the level of stability of farm incomes, budgetary constraints and the "Berlin ceiling", and trade and enlargement considerations. All those elements mean that there will be change. We must be able to manage that change.

We must try to ensure that whatever reform takes place is on a scale and at a pace that does not put unacceptable pressure on farmers, and that it will not cause problems for the viability of the rural economy and rural communities.

There are social and narrow economic issues to be considered. I have been making those points. We want no isolation or marginalisation in rural communities, and we do not wish to create a situation whereby rural communities may "fall off the edge". Due to the nature of our industry and the number of small farms in Northern Ireland, it is extremely important that the pace of change can be absorbed and the farming community can be sustained through it. We must make the important point that change is coming and is inevitable. However, we must manage that change.

Agricultural Subsidies

9. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether there has been overpayment of agricultural subsidies in the past year; and to make a statement. (AQO 853/01)

Ms Rodgers: There has been no general overpayment of agricultural subsidies in the past year. Individual cases of overpayment arise when the completion of

administrative checks or information from inspections or investigations show that the initial assessment of entitlement, based on the claim made by the farmer, was incorrect. In such cases, the details are entered on the Department's debtors' ledger, and in accordance with EU regulations, the Department is obliged to pursue recovery of the overpayment. In the past year, 384 new debt cases amounting to £255,176 were recorded in the Department's debtors' ledger. That represents around only two cases per 1,000 claims processed and around 0.14% of the total value of subsidy payments made.

Mr Savage: I welcome the Minister's statement. Will the money be recouped?

Ms Rodgers: There is an obligation on the Department to recoup the money, and it will be recouped in due course.

Meeting with Irish Agriculture Minister

10. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she will next meet Mr Joe Walsh TD, Minister for Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, and what issues will be on the agenda.

(AQO 860/01)

Ms Rodgers: My next formal meeting with Mr Walsh will be at the North/South Ministerial Council agriculture sectoral meeting, which will take place in April. Our agenda will include items such as animal and plant health research and development, issues of mutual interest linked to CAP reform, WTO negotiations and cross-border rural development. In the interim, I may contact Mr Walsh on an informal basis if issues arise that affect both jurisdictions.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Minister for her detailed answer. Does she agree that a single island agricultural economy offers the best future prospects for the farming community and industry, North and South?

Ms Rodgers: I thank Mr McElduff for his question. Within the remit of the North/South Ministerial Council there is recognition by Minister Walsh and myself that in many areas — such as animal health — a North/ South all-island strategy could be useful. Regardless of political positions or persuasions, that is recognised across the community as being beneficial to everyone and threatening to no one. There are common agriculture priorities on the island. It makes common sense to work together through the North/South Ministerial Council to co-ordinate our activities and efforts when they can benefit the people of Ireland as a whole.

Good Farming Practice Initiative

11. **Mr McMenamin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment she

has made of the recently launched good farming practice initiative; and to make a statement. (AQO 858/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department recently launched the Farming Today in the LFA training programme for farmers in less-favoured areas. The programme, which has been designed in partnership with the industry and funded under the Programme for Government, contains two elements — good farming practice and good business sense. Both elements are delivered locally and have a practical workshop style closely linked to the needs of participants. The good farming practice element is designed to help farmers in less-favoured areas meet new environmental obligations that are a condition of LFA and agrienvironment support payments.

Those payments are worth approximately £30 million annually to the local agriculture industry, and failure to follow good farming practice puts the payments at risk. The Farming Today in the LFA programme is now open for business and is attracting considerable interest from the farming community. To date, approximately 3,000 farmers have registered to participate in one or more elements of the training programme.

4.00 pm

Mr McMenamin: How is the initiative linked to the rural portal that was recently launched by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development?

Ms Rodgers: The rural portal is an ICT-based gateway designed to provide farmers with a means to simply and conveniently access information relevant to their business. It was funded under the Programme for Government and is a further example of the investment that we are making to help the industry to meet today's challenges and to adapt to the needs of the future. Although the good farming practice programme cannot be delivered through the rural portal, it will be used to make information available on both elements of the Farming Today and the LFA training programme. That information will include details of the programme and how farmers can apply to participate.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In relation to the last question —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, Mr McHugh, I was calling you for question 15.

Countryside Management Scheme

15. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the number of applications made to the countryside management scheme; and (b) the number accepted. (AQO 859/01)

Ms Rodgers: Is question 15 the next question? What happened to questions 12, 13 and 14?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Members are not in the Chamber, so they cannot be called.

Ms Rodgers: I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was somewhat confused.

A total of 1,010 applications were received when the countryside management scheme was first opened for applications, of which 280 were subsequently withdrawn or rejected as being ineligible. The finance available allowed 400 applicants to be offered management agreements, and 330 applicants subsequently accepted agreements and entered the scheme. A second round of applications was conducted between May and July 2001, and 1,457 applications were received, including applications from people who were unsuccessful in the first application exercise. Of this total, 356 applications have subsequently been withdrawn or rejected as ineligible —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I reluctantly have to stop the Minister now, because we are past our time.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker*]

ATTACKS ON FAMILIES IN COLERAINE

Mr Dallat: I am grateful for the opportunity to recount the experiences of my constituents, who have lived through three years of hell, suffering attack after attack by so-called Loyalist paramilitaries. Those attacks have at times been sustained and at other times spasmodic, depending on the mood of the thugs who carry them out.

I am pleased that David McClarty is on the Bench opposite and will also contribute to the debate. I thank him for his unequivocal support and leadership during that period — no ifs, no buts and no excuses, and that is the way it should be. Any politician who finds excuses for terror groups who commit crimes against innocent people have nothing to contribute to the development of democracy. In simple terms, they are a sad bunch.

More than 200 attacks have taken place over the past three years. Some of the attacks were minor, but nevertheless they have been a living nightmare for the victims. Other attacks have been very serious: unexploded pipe bombs by the dozen, pipe bombs exploding in living rooms, and gunfire accompanying pipe bomb attacks. Public houses have been shot up and have been burnt out. Over the past two years, there have been 55 pipe bomb attacks alone, with a catalogue of incidents involving murder, attempted murder, pipe bombs, intimidation and so forth. The majority of those attacks were against Catholics, and were carried out in the name of Protestants, without their approval. Those carrying out the outrages have no mandate from anyone and not only have they hurt the Catholic community grievously, they have offended the Protestant community, which wants no part of their evil doing and has said so time and time again. Attacks have not been exclusively against Catholics. Anyone who gets in the way of these people is fair game, with at least one Protestant family in exile because it dared to stand up to them.

The police have had recent success against these evil elements, and I hope that there will be many more. In 2000, eight searches were carried out; 20 people were arrested and six charged. In 2001, the number of searches doubled to 16; 18 people were arrested and nine charged. I am sorry that such success did not come sooner because many children have been traumatised by the violence used against their families. The impact of this sustained campaign has been psychologically devastating, and the mental agony cannot be quantified. The fallout will go on for years and may well have ruined the educational potential of the victims. It has damaged their personalities and everything that makes them individuals in their own right. “Suffer little children...”

In the meantime, those behind these attacks lead comfortable lifestyles, developing legitimate businesses, feathering their nests, laundering their ill-gotten gains and setting themselves up as mandarins with power over whole communities. Surely it is time to bury the Mexican spaghetti western images of the past, when hard men entered towns and told people to leave or they would be shot before dawn.

The Housing Executive has the responsibility to make safe the homes of those who are attacked. It has fitted deadlocks to doors and, on occasions, replaced glass with safety material capable of stopping pipe bombs. The Housing Executive could have done so much more if it had been permitted. Too often, families have been offered alternative accommodation in areas known to be more dangerous than those out of which they were intimidated. Why should families that have committed no crime, been found guilty of no offence and that have hurt no one, have to leave their homes and flee to England for safety? That is a denial of a basic human right — the right to live in one's own community, free from intimidation and violence.

On occasion it has been suggested that this is the work of a criminal element with no affinity to any known organisation. Such an explanation may well satisfy the consciences of some, but the pattern of events shows that the attacks have been highly organised and switched on and off at will as the situation demands.

When the number of attacks reached epidemic proportions more than a year ago, church representatives in the Coleraine area spoke out in the strongest of terms against them. The community as a whole expressed its opinion loudly and clearly. The police issued an eight-point plan to deal with the situation. Attacks ceased for a considerable period, but they started up again, focused largely on Gaelic sports clubs and culminating in the death of a young man who, it is believed, died when handling a deadly device. He was less than twenty years of age, little more than a child. The young person had been lured into an organisation with nothing to offer anyone, irrespective of which community he or she comes from. Since then there have been no attacks, but there have been death threats and one attempted murder. People are on edge, not knowing when these evil people might be successful in claiming yet another life.

No one believed that it would be easy to come out of 30 years of violence. There might even be complacency; because people are no longer dying in their dozens on the streets of our cities and towns — Omagh excepted. We cannot allow ourselves to become complacent, and we cannot afford to allow terror groups to dictate law and order, to decide where people can and cannot live or to adjudicate on whether people should live or die. We cannot have a situation in which brave witnesses, who are prepared to give information to the police, are

intimidated and forced to withdraw their statements and tell the warlords that they will not do it again. Too much has been gained, and too much has gone into the peace process to allow that to become the norm. If we do, there is a real risk that the opponents of the peace process will use such activity as an excuse to consolidate their negative thinking and bankrupt policies. The terrorists want that. Then they are free to go on lining their pockets with the proceeds of peddled drugs, laundered fuel, cheap cigarettes, protection money and all the other schemes that they have devised to get rich on the back of a beleaguered community.

In Coleraine, and well beyond, there is a determination not to let the law of the jungle prevail. There is genuine desire to ensure that good triumphs over evil; trust overcomes fear; and happiness replaces the pain that has been felt by so many over the last 30 years. We must build on that, encourage it and reward the good people, many of whom work in voluntary community groups with meagre resources. Given encouragement and leadership we can chart a new beginning. We are doing just that, but the message must be sent out time and again that the days of the bully boys are over.

Irrespective of what community they claim to represent, there must be no future for the men of violence or the opportunities that they crave to divide people on a sectarian basis. Those opportunities must be removed forever. It is surely time to step out into the no-man's-land in the divided community, to take risks for peace and to be brave and not afraid of setbacks or of displeasing some people in the process. It is time to put away the graffiti brushes, replace the murals of anger with messages of love and to build bridges of trust, rather than so-called peace walls.

4.15 pm

In Coleraine, good people are determined to put the past behind them. However, that will not happen without leadership from the politicians, action from the police, initiatives from community leaders and direction from the Assembly. From now on there must be more to unite us than to divide us. As the peace process gains momentum, no one must be left behind.

The innocent families who have yet to experience the benefits of the peace process that has so much to offer everybody, must not be left on the platform of despair, abandoned and alone. That would undermine the very essence of the Assembly, which is encouraging equality for all in every respect. There is renewed hope and determination to shake off the images of the past. Above all, there is a realisation that success can only be achieved by partnerships built on a solid foundation of trust, based on respect for differences and acceptance of diversity.

The hard men who have done so much to hurt people and damage the image of Coleraine have nothing to contribute. In most cases the godfathers do not live in the local community but direct their campaign of terror from outside it. It is time for the authorities to reel them in and to allow the ordinary, decent people to continue the long haul to permanent peace and political and economic stability.

Mr McClarty: I was born and raised in Coleraine, and I have lived in the town all my life, except for a brief sojourn in another area of the Province. Coleraine borough has always prided itself on its many wonderfully positive attributes: its geographical position on the north coast, its many natural attractions and tourist amenities, and its excellent record of good community relations. Coleraine was fortunate to have been spared the worst of the troubles that have afflicted the Province for the last 30 years.

Today, the community in Coleraine, for the most part, remains united against violence, bigotry and intolerance. That is why it is regrettable that this debate exposes the negative elements that exist in the town, which seek to drag the people of Coleraine in a direction in which they have no wish to be taken.

Unfortunately, the image of intolerant, violent and thuggish behaviour raises too often its ugly head from the gutter of society. Despite all the positive aspects of Coleraine, there is no point in disguising the fact that sinister sectarian and non-sectarian behaviour permeates the majority of law-abiding residents.

All such behaviour is sickening, senseless and reeks of bigoted intolerance. That intolerance is directed against religion, race and even age. It is worrying that the non-sectarian attacks that we increasingly hear about on our streets, including Coleraine's, appear to be more senseless than ever before. Often they are unprovoked and without the slightest shred of justification.

Last week I searched the BBC News website for all the news stories associated with Coleraine. I was shocked by the litany of reports of pipe bomb attacks, shootings, assaults, robberies, stabbings and deaths all of which bore headlines such as "Arrests after girl, 11, shot", "Loyalists blamed for pipe bomb attacks", "Shots linked to feud", "Armed robbery at restaurant", "Man injured after attack by gang", and "Man wounded in shooting". The list continues. There is little doubt that over the past few years Coleraine has had more than its fair share of paramilitary and non-sectarian incidents. People have the right to live peacefully, walk safely and sleep securely in their homes. Those rights are basic in other democracies. Here, however, they elude too many people too much of the time.

What should be the response to those incidents and threats? I have a couple of suggestions to make. First, murderous sectarian attacks, for example, pipe bombings,

shootings and beatings, are often carried out because the narrow-minded perpetrators justify their actions as being carried out on behalf of their community. Those actions resonate with their superficial sense of justice. Much good work is going on in Coleraine, as in other towns in the Province, to try to break down the community fences that have been reinforced over many years. Young people from both traditions must learn that their violent actions are self-defeating and purposeless, serving only to destroy their own community. They must get to know the "other side", and make it a friend rather than an enemy.

Secondly, in both sectarian and non-sectarian attacks the culprits feel little fear. Their attitude appears to be "chances are we will get away with it, so what have we got to lose?" The Assembly must restore to the minds of criminals the realisation that justice will eventually catch up with them. The wider community has always had a large part to play in that. Support for the police is vital, and everyone must be encouraged to tell them what they know about a crime. Furthermore, the police must be active on the ground and be seen to be so. That restores a community's confidence in law and order and gives a sense of security, both of which are now at a low ebb. Attacks on homes and on people are to be condemned outright. Criminals, thugs and the paramilitaries must learn the difference between right and wrong and should be punished accordingly.

I am pleased to say that Coleraine remains a pleasant place in which to live and work. Many problems are not unique to the town, or, indeed, to the Province. That is no excuse for ignoring the trauma that families experience after an attack. Nor is it an excuse for not finding adequate solutions to the problems that we face. Members must endeavour to play a part, to find ways to resolve the intractable problems that are associated with narrow-minded bigotry — the attacks on homes, the pipe bombings and shootings and the senseless, thuggish behaviour that is endemic in a mindless few. Unfortunately, it is a continuing task. However, for evil to succeed it requires men and women of good will to do nothing. I and other elected representatives in the area pledge ourselves to continue the work of reconciliation.

Mr Campbell: I join the two Members in universal and unequivocal condemnation of the acts of violence in the Coleraine area.

Two basic underlying themes should be the cornerstone of our approach to acts of violence, from any source. They should be the cornerstone from the beginning of what is euphemistically called "our troubles" to date, and in the future.

One cornerstone, which is apparent today, is that there should be absolute condemnation of, and unequivocal opposition to, violence. For my party and myself, that has always been the case. I am thankful that it has been

the case for most in our society for 30 years. However, it has not always been the case with some in our society, as some have declined to condemn acts of violence.

To merely condemn the violence is, however, insufficient. Some have refused to condemn it, and continue to do so. Some condemn violence, but go no further. The two principles are unequivocal condemnation and support for all the institutions that try to bring to justice those responsible for the violence. That has not always been the case either.

Across Northern Ireland — and in some parts of Coleraine, but, I am thankful to say, not too many — there has almost been a pick-and-choose mentality towards those two fundamental themes. I hope that those two principles will soon be cornerstones for everyone. I hope that one day soon we will not only unequivocally condemn violence, but unequivocally support the police and other institutions that are responsible for bringing the perpetrators of violence to justice.

I have outlined my approach to the violence in Coleraine. Two of my East Londonderry Colleagues, Mr McClarty and Mr Dallat, mentioned that many of the incidents have left families bewildered, angry, concerned and fearful. As the Member of Parliament for the area, I have had cause to visit many of the families to try to be of assistance, as have other Assembly Members and local councillors. It is difficult to help at those times, because people want an assurance that such incidents will not happen again. It is difficult for public representatives to give that assurance.

It is only when the two cornerstones are in place, and everyone, from all sections of the community, is united in condemning violence, and equally united in supporting the forces of law and order to bring people to justice, that some confidence can be given to the victims that their nightmare might be nearing an end.

Further to my general point and my expression of support for the families who had to suffer the attacks, I will make an analysis of the current problem. It would be much easier to simply condemn the attacks, to ask everyone to support the police in pursuing the people responsible and to leave it at that. If I did that, there would undoubtedly be knowing nods not only from all around the Chamber but from those who subsequently read the comments in Hansard. However, I would be doing myself an injustice if I left it at that.

In 2002 in Coleraine, as in other areas, there is frustration in parts of the community that police numbers have been so affected by the implementation of the Patten Report that violence is much more difficult to detect. It is felt that it is much more difficult to apprehend the criminals because of the Patten Report, because police stations are under threat and because police numbers are being reduced.

Many people in the Coleraine area and across Northern Ireland are at a loss to understand how on the one hand there is public hand-wringing and condemnation of violence, while on the other there is support for the reduction in the numbers of police who are trying to deal with that violence. We must therefore examine ways to beef up the numbers of available personnel and to provide more resources for the police to ensure that criminal activities cease.

Other Members referred in various ways to some of those activities. Many attacks have been nakedly sectarian. Some have been against innocent Catholics, some against innocent Protestants. Others have been nothing to do with religion at all. The last couple of weeks saw the first anniversary of the death of an elderly man whose murder in Coleraine town centre appeared to be the result of mindless violence with no religious or political overtones whatsoever. There have been attacks on a variety of people in the Coleraine area for a multiplicity of reasons.

However, the environment and atmosphere created not only in Coleraine but across Northern Ireland by political institutions that command neither the consent nor the support of the Unionist community leave a breeding ground for violence in parts of that community that I and others have to combat. We have to pressurise, lobby, argue and persuade people that the way to address those issues is by the democratic route and not through violence, its promotion or its support. That becomes increasingly difficult when every opportunity has been taken to make the point to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the Secretary of State, or to the Prime Minister in the House of Commons, that we need a system of government in Northern Ireland that we can all support, and they have simply dismissed that and have said that they will proceed with the Belfast Agreement.

It is more and more difficult to reason and argue with elements of the Unionist community and to tell them that the democratic route is the only way to make changes to the system. Unfortunately, that means that the difficult task must continue. I will not be dissuaded. I will argue, lobby, campaign, persuade and pressurise every element in my community that is open to persuasion to ensure that in this Assembly, in local councils and districts, in Westminster and anywhere else a forum is available to establish a properly accountable system of government with proper consent and support in our community. It will not be achieved by throwing pipe bombs or by carrying out acts of violence. That is reprehensible; it should be condemned and it must cease. I hope that it will.

4.30 pm

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Mr Campbell's analysis of what has happened in Coleraine and other parts of the community is hard to reconcile. He said that the violence occurred because

there was no democracy. I find his attitude, particularly towards recent events in Coleraine, ambivalent, ambiguous and, in that context, inappropriate for an elected representative. He chooses to call it the Loyalist community or the Unionist community, but it is not the Loyalist community or the Unionist community in its entirety. Those in that community who are responsible for the attacks are those who continue to oppose the concept, ideas and democracy of the Good Friday Agreement. The last Member who spoke suggested that those who attacked innocent Catholics and Nationalists were motivated by their opposition to the Good Friday Agreement. That is unacceptable.

Built into that is a sectarianism that has nothing to do with the Good Friday Agreement. It has nothing to do with the issues that the last Member raised. He said that over the past 30 years his party attempted to reduce sectarian tensions; we know the contrary to be the case. It has used the long spoon to sup with Loyalist paramilitaries from his community.

As Mr Dallat knows, sectarianism does not affect Coleraine alone. It exists in south Derry also.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Kelly, I must remind you that the wording of the Adjournment debate is specific. It refers to attacks on families in Coleraine. Irrespective of which side of the House, I advise you not to deviate from that.

Mr J Kelly: The previous Member to speak strayed a remarkable distance from the issue of attacks in Coleraine. However, these attacks are endemic in Coleraine and in other parts of our society. Surely, the cornerstone of any society is a policing service that enjoys the confidence of all people. It is interesting that the previous Member to speak attributes many of the problems to the implementation of the Patten Report. Does he agree with the Patten Report, or does he think that it has not fulfilled the expectations intended of it?

Attacks that are motivated by sectarianism, wherever they occur, are to be condemned. Attacks on people in their homes because of their religion, whether Catholic or Protestant, are to be condemned. The ethos of political ambiguity and political ambivalence that create the climate in which such attacks are given credence must also be condemned.

I assumed that the previous Member would have been the last person to speak about political violence, given his party's position.

Mr Douglas: I had not intended to speak on this subject today — I had not thought much about it. However, it seems in order that I do.

I categorically condemn all attacks on anyone in Coleraine, from wherever they come. I have always condemned such attacks and I always will. No one has the right to attack anyone else or their property. Mr Dallat said that the pipe-bomb attacks in Coleraine

were carried out by Loyalists. I do not know whether the perpetrators were Loyalists. It is interesting that Mr Dallat, who supported the referendum and the Belfast Agreement at the last election, supported the so-called peace process with three Loyalists who also backed the agreement and the referendum. If he now says that those so-called Loyalists are attacking Roman Catholic people in Coleraine, something must have happened to have caused them to move so far apart.

I was amused to hear David McClarty's diatribe on how this process has damaged Coleraine. He also supported the Belfast Agreement. Like Mr Dallat, he stood up in Coleraine town hall and did his utmost to put down the RUC. I was there. Mr Dallat spoke briefly to attack the RUC, saying that they should be disbanded. He then left the meeting. David McClarty stayed on at the meeting and was very supportive of the agreement. He also said that there should be a change in the police force. I would have no difficulty with a change in the police force, provided that it were an improvement.

Those people worked together in the so-called peace process. Today, they criticise the many people in the Coleraine area who have tried their best to achieve the peace that everyone is talking about. Not much has been said about the Protestant people in the Coleraine area who have suffered attacks over the past 30 years.

I know that we are not supposed to move away from the subject of attacks in Coleraine, but the person who was injured in Magilligan last week has many relatives in Coleraine. No mention has been made of him and of how his life has been destroyed. Nor has any mention been made of the way in which one of the Members for East Londonderry, John Dallat, used the RUC for his protection over the past 30 years. Many Roman Catholics were protected by the RUC and other security forces, and they should be very careful — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Douglas, I caution you about deviating from the subject of the debate. The debate concerns attacks in Coleraine, and is not an opportunity for an attack on Mr Dallat.

Mr Douglas: I am not attacking Mr Dallat in particular. We must remember that these people benefited from the protection of the security forces, who did their best to ensure the well-being of everyone in East Londonderry, which includes Coleraine.

If we, as public representatives, are to work together for the peace that everyone talks about, we must be careful what we say in the future. We must continue to work together if we are to achieve peace in Coleraine and elsewhere. As public representatives, we need to ensure the continuity of the process. We cannot simply use opportunities such as this one to attack individuals because the proper system has not been put in place. I agree that we should always support fully the security forces. We should all have done that for the past 30 years.

Adjourned at 4.40 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 19 February 2002

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that he wishes to make a statement on telecommunications.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I welcome the opportunity to address Members on the key infrastructural matter of telecommunications. Telecommunications is central to economic development, as Members have repeatedly drawn to my attention, especially those from rural areas. It is also key to the knowledge-based, science-driven innovation dynamic. It has a strong social dimension and is crucial to addressing the digital divide. Much is happening nationally and regionally in Scotland, Wales, the English regional development agencies and the Republic to develop telecommunications policy and to integrate it in a broader economic development strategy.

It is important that Members be up to speed on all those developments, especially the response in Northern Ireland. Accordingly, I shall take three steps to set a framework for discussion. First, I shall outline the key parameters of the telecommunications issue and the complex legal policy and economic dimensions involved in addressing it. Secondly, I shall show the position of Northern Ireland in relation to telecommunications provision as outlined in the Mason Communications Report, which I placed in the Library early in December. Finally, I shall outline the action that is currently in train to advance telecoms policy and strategy in Northern Ireland and current and proposed initiatives.

I will now deal with the key parameters. Telecommunications has interesting similarities to, and differences from, energy. Unlike energy, telecommunications is neither devolved nor regulated regionally; it is a reserved issue that is regulated nationally.

However, like energy it is privatised, independently regulated and confronts the challenge of the very small market in Northern Ireland, which, in particular, tests us in attracting private sector investment and promoting

competition. Also, like energy, access to telecommunications is vital both commercially and domestically, so, like energy, it is a major infrastructure issue with very specialist applications.

Just as there are different fuel and energy sources, such as oil, gas, coal, lignite, and renewables, there are very different telecoms technologies with different applications and opportunities — for example, fibre, copper, wireless, mobile and satellite technologies. Many of those technologies are either at a relatively early stage of development or are still maturing, so it is an industry with exponential technological development.

The past 18 months have been a turbulent time for the sector; the industry has gone from rapid expansion to severe downturn and a scaling back of planned growth. In Northern Ireland we have first-hand experience of the impact of that downturn. The major implications of these factors are: the need to develop policy in a national context, in collaboration not only with the Department of Trade and Industry and the e-Envoy but also with the different and competing interests in the private sector and with the independent regulator; the need to ensure that in that context Northern Ireland has as much flexibility as possible to develop telecoms strategy in the interests of this region and to ensure that we keep up with Scotland, Wales, the English regional development agencies and the Republic; and the need to ensure that our actions are compatible with EU competition and state aid rules.

Accordingly, I ensured that Northern Ireland was represented fully on the e-Minister's stakeholders group, which reported to the Prime Minister at the end of November. I met both the e-Commerce Minister and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, and received assurances that we can develop distinctive policy in Northern Ireland so long as there are no EU complications and no additional funding implications for the Northern Ireland block. My officials have made links with Scotland and Wales to ensure complementarity with them. Officials also have very close links with the Department of Public Enterprise in the Republic, since on this issue there is a potentially strong North/South dimension in the evolution of telecoms policy, and North/South activity may well be important in the context of INTERREG III.

Picking up on the key recommendations in the Mason Communications benchmarking study, and following discussions with the local stakeholders, my Department has developed a broad strategic approach to implementing the strong emphasis on telecoms in the Programme for Government. I will summarise the Northern Ireland position as outlined in the Mason Communications report. This study compared Northern Ireland's current infrastructure with the Republic, Great Britain and selected US, European and East Asian exemplars.

One of the main points identified in the study was that Northern Ireland's backbone network, which is predominantly fibre-based, is on a par with international best practice. It gives us a strong telecommunications base, comparable to that in the Republic of Ireland and the other UK regions. It also means that broadband telecommunications using private leased lines are available readily across Northern Ireland. Companies such as Stream International and GEM have built their businesses through broadband telecommunications.

Other companies not in the information and communication technology (ICT) sector, such as Ulster Carpet Mills, are working more effectively in the global marketplace using broadband, and companies such as Shorts and Nortel routinely use videoconferencing to communicate with their parent companies in Canada.

OFTEL regulates the prices that the incumbent operator can charge for a range of telecoms products and services, including leased lines. However, I recognise that the level of these costs means that they are often not appropriate for small and medium-sized companies, which form the bulk of our business profile in Northern Ireland.

As Members have been keen to point out to me on several occasions, the key issue in telecoms provision is local access, linking customers to the new and developing high-speed, high-volume services and, especially, at a cost that companies feel they can justify.

In this regard we face exactly the same challenges as every other region in the UK and the European Union.

The benchmarking in the Mason Communications study highlights that Northern Ireland is on a par with most other regions and, crucially, that it faces the same intimidating challenge: to encourage the private sector to provide broadband access to sparsely populated and non-commercial areas, especially during the current telecoms market downturn.

The Mason Communications Report makes a clear distinction between the broadband services required by the vast majority of companies and those required by telecoms-intensive knowledge-based industries such as back-office operations and multimedia computer software operations. It is also important to recognise that there is a range of competing technologies, each with its own positives and negatives, different applications and different market prospects. New technologies are continually emerging and presenting new challenges and opportunities, so there is no single or specific magic bullet technology that will, at a stroke, answer the needs of all industries.

In conclusion, the Mason Communications study indicates that in a privatised market with competing telecommunications suppliers the Government have to remain technology-neutral while, at the same time,

doing what they can to demonstrate the applicability of various technologies and to stimulate demand for broadband services. In effect, Northern Ireland's twin challenges are basically non-technological: to increase demand and increase competition.

Within the perimeters I have outlined – and taking full account of the current Northern Ireland position and the challenges we face – my Department is already engaged in a proactive programme with three key facets.

To stimulate demand, we must demonstrate to potential users, particularly industry and the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector, what each technology can contribute to their business and the associated costs. Accordingly, I have established an e-solutions centre at the Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU) to demonstrate to business not only the various technologies on offer, but the costs and quality of service associated with them. At the new centre demonstrations are provided of broadband access technologies such as leased line, asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL), integrated services digital network (ISDN), standard telephone, satellite, wireless access, mobile 2.5 G and Bluetooth, which is wireless technology.

The e-solutions centre provides the only facility in Northern Ireland where companies can compare and contrast these technologies and get impartial objective advice from skilled telecoms experts. Indeed, the facility has been visited by the regional development agencies in the rest of the UK and is regarded as a leading example of demand-side activity; it is a facility that many of the regional development agencies may well replicate in the months ahead.

IRTU is developing an outreach marketing strategy, which will entail taking that expertise out through the rest of the region. That strategy will include sub-regional demonstrations of leading-edge technology at key locations throughout the Province. Regional advisers have been appointed to operate with this outreach activity and to provide guidance and advice on a one-to-one basis to companies.

Those three very different initiatives will serve not only to demonstrate the relative use of each key technology, but to stimulate market demand. In this context I am particularly keen to address the potential needs of SMEs, especially those outside the Greater Belfast area without access to affordable broadband telecommunications.

I have already announced financial aid for SMEs in such areas to facilitate their access to broadband services via satellite. That – again an exemplar initiative – provides each SME with up to 50% support for both the setting up and first-year running costs of satellite connections up to a maximum of £1,500. To date, over

60 requests for application forms have been received. Over 20 of those have been completed and returned, and 10 letters of offer have been issued. I am confident that our target of 250 SMEs will be achieved.

An additional benefit of the programme has been the stimulation of the satellite market in Northern Ireland, with four satellite providers — Aramiska, Xantia, Eirstream, and BeyondDSL — as well as BT, contacting IRTU to state their intentions to pursue proactively local demand.

10.45 am

I understand that we are the first region in the UK to implement this kind of initiative, and in our recent discussions with the Department of Public Enterprise in the Republic, considerable interest was expressed in the possibility of replicating the initiative in that jurisdiction.

In relation to the Department of Trade and Industry's £30 million broadband fund, I have also secured £1.5 million from that Department for a range of innovative feasibility schemes and pilot actions designed to examine various ways of extending broadband technologies to a wider range of users. My Department will soon be inviting applications for feasibility and pilot actions.

In that context, my Department has already contacted local councils, as we recognise that they could have a key role to play in facilitating local access in their communities, and we will be taking forward our discussions with the economic development consortia, involving organisations such as CORE, SEED and Into the West. We will be contacting those organisations to discuss possible ways of working together to stimulate feasibility and pilot actions.

Since the Mason Communications study concluded that the main problem in Northern Ireland — as in many other regions and countries — is local access, we have also been considering how best to create market demand to encourage broadband roll-out by the private sector. That is another important area in which local councils, public bodies and private sector contacts can play a collaborative role in creating demand. Accordingly, my Department is working towards a call for proposals for local access projects and a request for expressions of interest in possible flagship projects that might, for example, link our science park developments with our research centres of excellence.

As Members will be aware, current market conditions are not immediately conducive to a positive response from the private sector — though not precluding a significant response from the public sector — so the precise timing of such calls and requests requires careful consideration, as do the state aid and legislative implications. Work is currently proceeding on both those

issues, and I propose to keep the Assembly informed of subsequent developments.

Meanwhile, I would be grateful if Members could encourage as positive a response as possible in their respective constituencies to our current demand-side initiatives, especially from their district councils, working in concert or collaboration with one another. The more that local councils, other public sector bodies and the private sector work together and pool their requirements to create the necessary critical mass of market demand, the better. We would be particularly keen to see consortia-based activities, preferably with different technological applications.

In that collaborative context, the aggregation of public sector demand is a particularly important issue. I am pleased to say that an interdepartmental working group has been established, following discussions with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, to examine how best to approach the aggregation of public sector demand within Government and the related public services. It might not be possible to do that in all circumstances, and various initiatives are under way to promote the greater use of broadband in the areas of education, libraries and health.

A formidable amount of work is proceeding on the progressive development of the telecommunications strategy. Much work has been, and is being, done to advance this important economic and social issue. Over the coming months, further initiatives will be proceeding, and I am looking to a continuous dialogue with the Assembly and its Committees as this important issue is taken forward.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the Minister's statement, especially the announcement of the e-solutions centre. That is a great move forward. It begins to create a healthier e-commerce culture around the various funding packages, especially that for small and medium-sized enterprises. The granting to them of access to broadband services is most welcome. However, can the Minister go a little further and be more specific about what we are doing, if anything, on a hands-on version to demonstrate applicability and increase usage?

He mentioned local government and our various constituencies, and I will do all in my power to promote the thing. He even mentioned the aggregation of public sector demand for broadband, and that is my greatest concern. I wonder what, if anything, we can do to bring the various Government Departments under our control into the twenty-first century. The public sector seems to have a massive resistance to getting wired up and using e-commerce to its full extent.

I am particularly concerned about health, where I have some expertise. Again, I emphasise that I am not making a political point, or pointing the finger at the Minister of Health. I am simply asking that those

people down the line in the bowels of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety get their act together, because we are in the nineteenth century in terms of communication strategy.

Does the Minister feel that there is something that can be done? There is no point in preaching to, or pushing, the private sector, if our own house is not in order.

Sir Reg Empey: Dr McDonnell is correct in saying that we have to lead by example. We have trawled round all the Departments and asked them to tell us the level of demand that they currently experience. Dr McDonnell is also correct that health would be the largest single user. Clearly, health and education would be the largest users in the Government sector.

However, the reason for aggregating public sector demand is to find out what everybody currently uses, to estimate growth and to find out what the total is. Currently every Department does its own thing, has its own telecommunications budget and makes its own arrangements.

The purpose of this exercise is to find out how many users are in a particular area and what their volume of use is. Private companies will not put in the services unless there is a critical volume of use. Many of the companies will not know what that is. Indeed, the Government do not know. However, over recent months — especially in the past year — we have learnt more about the demand out there. We have a much clearer picture today than we had a year ago.

Two things will happen. First, if a major user of broadband is just up the road, it will be much cheaper for a company to link into that when it is nearby than if it was at a long distance. That is common sense. Secondly, we must get competition into the market, and that is the only way we will bring costs down. If suppliers begin to see where there is a volume, they can focus on that area and put the infrastructure in place. They will know that there will be an economic volume of traffic to justify the investment.

Basically, it is a very simple exercise. Local authorities, working in conjunction with groups in their area, will have better local knowledge, and they can go through the exercise locally and identify where the key users might be.

Dr McDonnell talked about resistance. Initially there may have been a little resistance, but that is breaking down. When I was in London in November 2001 I met Douglas Alexander, the Minister at the Department of Trade and Industry who has responsibility for these matters. He made it clear that the Government in London are making this one of their top priorities. The public sector has a critical volume that can

stimulate this demand and take the lead. That is what we are all trying to do.

I said that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is trying to stimulate demand by other means. We have the centre at IRTU where people can come along and see all the technologies in front of them. What do ADSL, wireless, and satellite mean? People can come to the centre and find out.

They will get indications of what it will cost them and what it will do, and they will take advice. Five advisers have been appointed throughout the Province. They will talk with companies on a one-to-one basis, and training can be provided if it is deemed necessary. We are trying to take the message out to the country so that people will have access, and we are trying to stimulate demand, something about which I have been frequently asked in the Chamber.

Mr Gibson: E-commerce and e-technology are the new infrastructures, and they are useful as a means of overcoming remoteness and rurality. I welcome the Minister's efforts on the SMEs. As far as my constituency is concerned, the emphasis must be on the small rather than the medium. Given the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's recent statement on the vision for agriculture and rural diversification, what co-operation has the Minister's Department had with the promotion and stimulation of broadband and, indeed, other forms of telecommunications, so that rurality and remoteness are replaced by equality of opportunity for the rural west?

Mr Speaker: I do not know whether it is because the debate is about telecommunications, but I am experiencing a great deal of interference and white noise. Before I call the Minister to reply, I ask Members who wish to have conversations to have them in the Lobby and let those Members who are desperately struggling with this complex matter to hear what the Minister says.

Sir Reg Empey: May I suggest that satellite technology might be the cure for that, Mr Speaker?

Mr Gibson has questioned me on several occasions over the past two years on this. Indeed, all the members of team West Tyrone have questioned me consistently and frequently on this. He is correct. This can be one of the tools that we can use to ease the problems of remoteness in the rural west. We are currently using IRTU's new pilot scheme, which, as I referred to in my remarks, is the first in the United Kingdom. We have put £250,000 into this scheme. It means that a small company — it could be a one-or-two-person company — can apply to the Department, and we will assess the application. We will pay up to £1,500 or 50% of the cost of the hardware, the software and half of the first year's running costs. At the end of

that year we will assess the position of the company and whether it feels that it has benefited.

We have also secured £1.5 million from the Department of Trade and Industry in London, which will enable us to undertake such pilot schemes. In the first instance, we are thinking of a wireless-based scheme, which would be very suitable for a rural area. A base station linking a number of users in a particular geographical area would provide those people with access. That is a pilot that we could run, and there are others. The whole purpose, as Mr Gibson will know, is to provide access and to level the pitch for people in remote areas.

There is a misunderstanding about broadband. It is widely available in Greater Belfast and throughout Northern Ireland, because there is a backbone network through most major towns. However, it can be an expensive process to get involved in, so we are looking for a variety of technologies. Away from the major centres of population, although technically possible, it is in practice economically impossible.

We are exploring cheaper technologies, and satellite has helped. We have four operators in the market that are suited to areas such as west Tyrone. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has responded positively to our request for information about demand. Opportunities, especially for rural areas, will present themselves under INTERREG III.

11.00 am

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's consistent efforts to ensure that the local economy is technologically proficient and can compete in the global marketplace. The Minister has stretched himself in exploring all possibilities. Does he agree that satellite technology is the most expensive and least cost-effective system, notwithstanding the grant aid that would be needed to cover set-up costs and running costs for the first year? That system would institutionalise disadvantage in the rural community.

BT has a fully developed fibre-optic system in all its main exchanges in the North. In exchange for the modest investment of £250,000, it could render proficient each of the exchanges in their delivery of an ADSL to every household, small and medium-sized enterprise, college, school, hospital, medical centre and Department, which would facilitate joined-up government. Would that not be more cost-effective? Would it not create the level playing field that some Members and the Minister referred to if BT were encouraged to accelerate the process of upgrading its exchanges from south Fermanagh to north Down and for everyone in the North. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Sir Reg Empey: I do not accept that satellite is the most expensive form of technology. Satellite could be

one of the least expensive technologies for rural areas. It would cost a fortune to install a hard wire in a rural area. In some cases, it would be almost impossible to finance without a huge subsidy. Satellite could cost £150 to £300 a month to operate. There is a misunderstanding about ADSL. For technical reasons, it works only in a radius of 3 to 5 miles of its exchange because of electricity and the movement of data, so one can imagine the number of stations that would be required. Each station costs between £200,000 and £300,000.

ADSL is suitable only in certain situations. The system allows a user to receive eight times more information in than it can give out; it is asymmetric. It would, therefore, be useful to a domestic user who wants video information. Such a user could get plenty of information in and would not need to put it out again. We must be careful not to focus on only one technology, because not every technology works in the same situation. Provision should be made on a case-by-case basis. One reason that the Department has avoided backing a specific technology is that the situation is evolving continuously. New inventions and developments are coming forward. We cannot say today what will be necessarily the most suitable solution in one or two years' time, so we will try to remain technology-neutral.

First, I assure Mr McLaughlin that we have established that at the very least we are on a par with, and in some cases better than, our nearest competitors in the Republic and in the rest of the United Kingdom, and our intention is to ensure that we remain ahead. Secondly, we are the first region in the UK to run this pilot scheme. Thirdly, Mr McLaughlin should be aware that we have a full and major commitment — not only on the equality issue, but because it makes economic sense — to ensure that all the Province can make a contribution to our economic development. They can do it on the basis that they will be on as level a playing field as we can possibly make with the major centres of population.

Basically, that is our policy. The costs will change from year to year, and that is a lesson that we have learnt. However, I assure Mr McLaughlin that currently satellite technology is not the most expensive.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest in encouraging businesses to adopt modern IT methods, in that I am a council nominee director of a local enterprise agency. I welcome the Minister's proposals to keep Northern Ireland's telecommunications infrastructure at the cutting edge of technology.

However, does he agree that in addition to the e-solutions centre at IRTU, his Department should encourage IT partnerships between universities, further education colleges, local businesses and enterprise agencies? Furthermore, does he agree that local government is often the first line of interaction between the

public and the public bodies? With reference to the interdepartmental working group, does he believe that there can be benefits if there is collaboration between councils, and that local government needs are considered within the group?

Sir Reg Empey: Mr Beggs will be aware that through the Department's information age initiative, the local enterprise network succeeded in its bid and received one of our major projects. The local enterprise network received money from the Executive programme funds. Indeed, it is one of the leaders.

I agree with him that, consequently, IT partnerships are a key issue. As he is a member of one of the local authorities in the core group, which comprises local authorities in County Antrim and County Londonderry, he will be aware that those local authorities are already working together. It is a consortium that has the potential to take forward an issue such as this. The south-east economic development (SEED) group of local authorities in the Province has the opportunity to do the same.

With regard to the link with the universities, there is a system called SuperJANET, which is a fibre-based exchange that allows huge amounts of information to pass between research centres in universities. I do not think that local further education colleges are currently linked to it, but I understand that it is being considered that where research is being conducted, there is a need for broadband availability.

I support Mr Beggs in saying that the interdepartmental working group is working actively on ways in which we can stimulate demand. More and more people have access to those technologies, but our job is to ensure that people use them. Three years ago Northern Ireland was almost bottom of the UK league of people having access to those services. We have caught up and are now competitive. However, we have to stimulate the demand even further, so that when we come to the point of encouraging companies to put in the infrastructure, they know that there is enough to justify their investments.

We welcome IT partnerships, and we encourage them to progress the roll-out of broadband locally as an economic development tool. We sought proactively to promote partnerships between local authorities and the local enterprise agencies. We are carrying out those two policies.

Further education colleges and universities are linked to the SuperJANET network. Therefore, we already have links in the further and higher education sector. In the information-age initiatives we are seeking to encourage the same links through the enterprise agencies. If that is encouraged, I believe that it will result in increased demand.

Mr McMennamin: Telecommunications are paramount in our economic and social structure, with so many users now being online. Does the Minister envisage cross-border links, especially in border regions, with other servers to provide a service for the rural population? Households in West Tyrone cannot avail of ADSL or affordable broadband services.

Sir Reg Empey: Mr McMennamin, like Mr Gibson, has availed of the opportunity to draw my attention to his constituency, as he has done on several occasions.

There are undoubtedly cross-border issues. Through INTERREG III there is potential for co-operation where there is currently no broadband availability. There are also opportunities through InterTradeIreland, which has the potential to invest in particular business-to-business projects. However, there is a wider issue here. Currently, we have only one major cross-border link, which runs down the eastern corridor. If anything goes wrong with that link, there are major difficulties — for example, if a digger breaks the link. There is, therefore, merit in having an alternative route to reinforce the service and provide a security of service. That is being considered.

There is also the roaming call problem, where the situation could arise, under the Eircom link, of having to make an international call from one part of a town in Northern Ireland to another part of the same town. That is not so much a governmental issue as one for the private companies to resolve, but it will have to be dealt with on a bilateral basis. Regulators may become involved in that problem.

The cross-border dimension has been reflected in discussions between my Department and the Department of Public Enterprise. There is also a huge east/west dimension. The world is a big place, and this is a relatively small geographical area. Companies are operating in both jurisdictions, and there is potential, especially in the rural areas, to extend the availability. The right answer for all situations will not always be ADSL — there are alternatives. We want to have test runs with satellite and wireless telecommunication for rural application.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Minister agree that this technology sets the boundaries for technological and economic development for the future? Does he agree also that the key issue is local access, because it will determine inward investment in the future?

I wrote to the Minister about the situation in Ballymoney and the issue of remoteness — a subject that other Members have addressed. In that area, broadband is available only to users in a 5 km radius of the telephone exchange. There is a capacity of only two megabytes per second (MBPS), and that allows only 60 concurrent users at any one time. Does the

Minister agree that such limited availability will make it difficult to attract inward investment to that area?

Will he address that problem by ensuring that the pilot and feasibility schemes that he has announced will look sympathetically at Ballymoney and other rural areas that are off the main hub connections, and that such areas will get a fair crack of the whip of technological advance?

11.15 am

Sir Reg Empey: Yes, I will. The main focus of the initiative is local access. Mr Paisley has drawn the Ballymoney issue to my attention. It is true that there are several ADSL-enabled exchanges in Northern Ireland, but there are none at Ballymoney. The closest ADSL exchanges are in Ballymena and Coleraine. No one beyond about 4 km or 5 km of the exchange has access to the technology, because of the technical issues. That reinforces my point that ADSL may not be the solution in every circumstance. Access to the service is the key issue. How the service is provided is a secondary issue.

I assure Mr Paisley that consideration will be given to the interests from that area. I do not know whether we have had applications from that area; perhaps it is too early to say. I said that there have been about 60 applications; the actual number may be over 70. I am confident that we will reach the target of 250 applications, although the programme has been running for only a few weeks. A range of technological solutions can counter the problem of remoteness that Mr Paisley mentioned, and I assure him that applications from the Ballymoney area will be given full consideration.

Mr Byrne: Telecommunications infrastructure is now as crucial as any physical infrastructure. I welcome the e-solutions centre at IRTU, which will greatly benefit small and medium-sized enterprises. Can the Minister tell us how the regional organisers will operate? Where will they be based, and will their budget be adequate to engage effectively with small and medium-sized enterprises? Given that public service agencies and Government Departments could make greater use of that type of technology, does the Minister believe that decentralisation of Civil Service jobs could be facilitated in regional towns?

Sir Reg Empey: Mr Byrne never misses an opportunity to raise that issue. I did not expect it to be raised in this round of questions, so he did very well to squeeze it in. My Colleague Seán Farren is dealing with the matter of decentralisation of Civil Service jobs, and he has the report on it. The availability of appropriate telecommunications, which are crucial for the operation of any Government Department, is a significant issue. Undoubtedly, it will be easier to facilitate decentralisation where such facilities exist.

I said that there would be five special advisers. They will be able to work from the LEDU client list, and will have those connections. The LEDU client executives will be able to direct the special advisers to their customers so that they can update them. That does not mean that only LEDU clients can avail of the service. Anyone who contacts the e-solutions centre to seek advice or help can be facilitated through regional LEDU offices. However, I suspect that the LEDU client list will be the main source of clients. Those companies must be stimulated to avail of the appropriate technology, or at least to test it. It may not be suitable for everybody. However, we would like to see whether companies improve their business after using the technology for a year, or whether they gain or learn something from it and feel that it adds genuine value to their activities. There are no guarantees, but there will be results in many cases. Those results will be measured and tested, and that is how we intend to proceed.

GOLDEN JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement on the Golden Jubilee celebrations.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I feel proud and honoured to be the Executive Minister with responsibility for co-ordinating Her Majesty's Golden Jubilee celebrations in Northern Ireland.

The year 2002 is a historic one for the entire United Kingdom and Commonwealth. However, it is tinged with sadness following the death of Her Royal Highness, The Princess Margaret. The Assembly will know that it was in respect of the wishes of the palace that I did not make any public statements on that event last week. Members know that others did not show the same respect. That was regrettable and, indeed, shameful, because the disrespect came from those who loudly and at every opportunity profess their fidelity to Her Majesty. Although I kept a silence that was motivated entirely by my determination to comply with the wishes of the palace and Whitehall Departments, I had to listen to my actions being described, from the DUP Benches, as "obnoxious, revolting and scurrilous". — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 14, p257*].

Disgraceful scenes took place in the Chamber last week. However, the Assembly can get over that. It can and must raise the Golden Jubilee from the output of petty minds in the House to a higher level. The Assembly must demonstrate that it can rise above that and show that it can work together for the people of Northern Ireland in a mature and civilised manner. Let us show Her Majesty what we are capable of.

It is typical of Her Majesty that she will not allow personal circumstances to disrupt her duties as Queen and head of state. She is currently fulfilling several Commonwealth engagements around the globe. That is hardly surprising, as her life has been dedicated to her nation and the Commonwealth. That devotion and unselfishness are traits that have made her such a remarkable person. She has earned the admiration, respect and affection afforded her throughout the world. She has done that for the past 50 years — only the fifth monarch to do so in the past 1,000 years. Her Golden Jubilee is a milestone in our history and is worthy of appropriate recognition.

Not everyone in Northern Ireland will share those sentiments. However, the fact that we sit in the Assembly shows that the Province is entering a new era. Together we have broken new ground across society. People realise that we must work together for the sake of our children and for future generations. Now, more than ever, there is greater appreciation that the histories of all the people of these islands are linked inextricably.

The monarchy is part of our shared heritage. I am not so naive as to expect that all sections of society will share in the celebrations. However, I believe that all people will recognise that the jubilee is a significant event in our history.

The celebrations that my Department will help to fund will not be about defeating foes. They will not be about domination of one section of society by the other. They will not be about judging others' values and beliefs. They will not seek to achieve any ends other than that which they purport to commemorate — 50 years of hard, unstinting duty fulfilled by Her Majesty The Queen on behalf of all UK citizens. Different cultures can live and work side by side as full partners. Other countries have proved that that can be done; Northern Ireland can prove it too. I believe firmly that the promotion of one tradition does not mean the diminution of the other. The Golden Jubilee year provides a platform for the communities in Northern Ireland to come together in celebration. It provides a non-threatening opportunity to look to the future as well as a chance to look back at the events and changes of the past 50 years. I wish to see the Golden Jubilee celebrated in style throughout the Province.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has publicised the occasion widely. Although it is still early days, I am pleased with the response so far. More than 450 events have already been planned. Those will be published in a special booklet, titled the 'Golden Jubilee Diary of Events', which will give an overview of the celebrations taking place across Northern Ireland.

A small sample of those events includes a festival of evensong in Armagh, conducted by the Archbishop of Armagh, Lord Eames. A special garden in Newtownards designed for curriculum-based activities will also cater for a diverse range of community groups, such as people with special needs, the elderly and pre-school children. The Indian community will also contribute to the festivities by performing dance routines and music in its own colourful and unique way.

Many events can be expensive to run. Therefore, financial assistance is being made available from both National Lottery sources and my Department. The Awards for All scheme, run by lottery distributors, invites applications from organisations and groups that are planning events to celebrate the Golden Jubilee.

My Department has also initiated a small grants scheme for groups unable to accept lottery funding. A budget of £200,000 has been set aside for that. More than 260 applications are being considered, which demonstrates the high level of community interest and shows further evidence of the high esteem in which the Queen is held in Northern Ireland. In the light of that enthusiastic take-up in the Province, I am investigating the possibility of securing moneys to enable another

funding round. Meanwhile, the Awards for All scheme remains open.

Among the planned events that my Department supports is a tour of Belfast for 70 senior citizens, which will provide an opportunity for the less mobile and those on limited incomes to take a nostalgic look at the changes that have taken place in our capital city in the past 50 years. A one-day event will be held in County Down, featuring a historic exhibition that will include a display of wedding dresses that are more than 50 years old, farming practices, the community, local bands and the royal family.

A book of memories is being compiled that will include personal recollections and photographs for publication and posterity by senior citizens in a day care centre in County Antrim. The Ulster Museum will display 10 of the finest drawings by Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci, which are on loan from the royal library in Windsor Castle.

Members will agree that all those projects fit neatly into the themes that Her Majesty has suggested are appropriate to commemorate the occasion, especially the theme of celebrating the community. In addition, several local schoolchildren have already participated in a nationwide poetry competition. The winners will visit the palace in the summer. District councils are also playing their part. Many are organising events and assisting financially.

The idea of giving every schoolchild a commemorative memento has been floated. I am considering that idea. However, its cost would be substantial, and inevitably there would be waste. No matter how accurately the likely take-up of the offer was determined, some schools would decline to participate. Medals may be an option, but they are only one option.

I do not see why our planning should be constrained by what has happened previously; we can allow ourselves to be more flexible. I am keeping in mind Her Majesty's wish that there should be no undue expenditure from public funds on the programme of celebrations.

Among the options that I am investigating are ways in which children might become involved in celebrations that could also benefit their educational or personal development, and at the same time be fun and memorable. In other words, we can approach the subject creatively and imaginatively.

It would be inappropriate for me to go into detail now. However, initiatives that I am considering include small bursaries for schools or the production of CD ROMs, which all schoolchildren might enjoy and from which they would benefit. I shall continue to investigate options, and I shall keep the House informed.

Northern Ireland is progressing on many fronts, at a time when the monarchy is also undergoing a transitional

period regarding its public perception. Therefore, it is a time of change both for the people of the Province and for the monarchy. I do not fear that. Times of change are a challenge and a test, and the monarchy is facing this time of change with resolve, confidence and courage.

11.30 am

By so doing it sets an example for every person in the Province. The Golden Jubilee celebrations give us a wonderful opportunity to celebrate an illustrious past and an exciting future. We can all play a part in that, and I am proud to play mine.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr O'Neill): The Minister's statement gave a considerable amount of detail on the plans for the Golden Jubilee, and I thank him for that. Coming from a Nationalist tradition, and from one of the oldest families in Europe with its share of princely and kingly involvement, I recognise that the jubilee is a significant event for many British people, especially those from the Unionist tradition in Northern Ireland. This is an opportunity for Nationalists to show their commitment to the Good Friday Agreement by ensuring that all those who wish to celebrate the jubilee are not only free to do so but are encouraged and supported. In that context, has the Minister any plans to liaise with district councils so that every opportunity exists for a cohesive approach?

Mr McGimpsey: All district councils will play a role. Many have set aside budgets for small grant schemes, and programmes of events have been planned. The role of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is to liaise continually with all interested parties. District councils, with local representation, have an important role to play, and that will supplement perfectly the lottery's Awards For All scheme, which I have mentioned, and my Department's scheme for non-lottery funding. Wider celebration themes are emerging regionally, nationally and internationally. Major events have been planned by almost 50 countries, and a prime way to feed information to district councils has been to set up a local government forum to brief their Golden Jubilee officers.

Mr Speaker: May I remind Members that we have a substantial number of questions, and the limit of time for questions on the statement is one hour. I remind everyone to be as concise as possible.

Dr Adamson: As an Ulster Loyalist, an Irish Royalist and a British Unionist, I commend the Minister's statement to the House. On 4 May 1977, in the year of her Silver Jubilee, the Queen said of Nationalist aspirations:

"I number kings and queens of England and of Scotland and Princes of Wales among my ancestors, so I can readily understand these aspirations. But I cannot forget that I was crowned Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Perhaps this Jubilee is a time to remind ourselves of the benefits

which union has conferred on the inhabitants of all parts of the United Kingdom at home and in our international dealings.”

As the Minister said, the year 2002 still sees the monarchy held in high esteem throughout the world. Imbued with the established wisdom of an ancient civilisation —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have to ask the Member to ask a question. The reshuffle of Ministers will take place later on today, and then we will see who can make statements. However, at this point this Minister has made a statement, and I ask the Member to ask a question on it.

Dr Adamson: I will indeed, Mr Speaker. The substance of my question is contained in the statement.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to ask a question.

Dr Adamson: OK. That is a shame. Yes. You have interrupted the flow, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: If it is too difficult for the Member to find the question, he can hardly find fault with my wondering where it is. This is an opportunity for questions not speeches, and I made that clear before I called any Members.

Dr Adamson: Mr Speaker, to make sense of a question, there must be an introit. I will keep going.

Mr Speaker: The introits do not always make sense of the question.

Dr Adamson: Mr Speaker, I can assure you that this does. Does the Minister see the Golden Jubilee as a unique opportunity to emphasise the Ulster and Irish origins of the British monarchy?

Mr McGimpsey: There are many themes coming through that reflect our heritage. We have a rich and varied heritage and culture, of which the monarchy forms a pivotal part. As I said, it is only the fifth time in 1,000 years that a monarch has reached a Golden Jubilee, which is a major historic event and something to be celebrated on that level alone.

There are connections to the monarchy that run through these islands. It is important to point out that every opinion poll taken in the UK shows that the monarchy and the Queen have the overwhelming support of the general public, and that speaks volumes.

Mr Morrow: The Minister’s statement will come as a big disappointment to the House. Given his comments last week, we were expecting much more. However, at least today he is speaking and not huffing as he was last week, and we welcome that.

The Minister’s statement and the lack of commitment by his Department tell their own stories. In his statement he says that events are costly to organise. Given the amount of money that he is placing at the

disposal of those who want to organise events, you would almost think that they were cheap. He has set aside a budget of £200,000. To date, there have been 260 applications, so that works out at an average of £769 per event, which would just about pay for the liability insurance. It will come as a disappointment to those who wish to go forward —

Mr Speaker: I must ask the Member to come to the question.

Mr Morrow: Will the Minister assure the House that, in the event of the Department of Education’s not carrying out the wishes of the House to give every schoolchild a suitable souvenir to mark the Queen’s Golden Jubilee, his Department will step in and make such provision?

Mr McGimpsey: I must correct Mr Morrow. He said that I was huffing last week. I thought that I made it clear to Mr Morrow that I was following the wishes of the palace. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport issued a statement with the agreement of the palace to the effect that there would be no announcements or pronouncements on the Golden Jubilee, and that is why I kept quiet. So it was not a question, Mr Morrow, of huffing; it was a question of obeying the wishes of the palace.

Mr Morrow: The Minister should address the Chair.

Mr McGimpsey: The Member can point at me if he wants. However, it is a matter that merits a degree of respect, manners and decency. This is the Queen’s Golden Jubilee, and it is inappropriate for anyone to use it to score cheap, party political points.

Mr Morrow spoke of how disappointed he is. This is not primarily about money. The proposed celebrations will not cost large amounts of money. The Queen’s express wish is that there should be no undue expenditure from public funds on the programme of celebrations.

Mr Morrow, you should be careful. Please do not point — it is rude to point.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should speak through the Chair. It would be wise, particularly in situations such as this, for Members to avoid addressing one another directly.

Mr McGimpsey: The award scheme to which I refer is a non-lottery fund, which was set up by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. There is no closing date for applications to the Awards for All scheme. Several organisations object to taking lottery funding, so the Department set up a non-lottery fund, the fund to which I referred. As I said, given the uptake, I can make a case for increasing that fund.

The Department has been working on the matter for some time. In July 2001, it established a Northern Ireland Golden Jubilee advisory group. It also set up

and publicised the special funding scheme, established the local government forum to brief district council Golden Jubilee officers, and briefed Lord Lieutenants and Deputy Lieutenants. General information leaflets were published, some 20,000 of which were distributed throughout the district council areas. The Department has also worked with other devolved Administrations and Buckingham Palace to arrange, for example, the Golden Jubilee poetry competition. A great deal has been done, and I am sorry that Mr Morrow is disappointed.

Some 260 events are planned under the non-lottery award scheme alone. There are many other applications, and I can argue for more funding. The Awards for All scheme is also available. Northern Ireland has planned some 450 events, roughly a quarter of all the events planned in the United Kingdom. That indicates that Northern Ireland is doing well. More people want to celebrate here, and we are organising more events than any other part of the United Kingdom. The arrangements should not be a matter for disappointment.

The Department is still considering providing a memento of the occasion, and I am happy to provide further details.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. How can the Minister tell the House that he was silent last week? He was not silent; he was speaking on a motion that was not even before the House.

Mr Speaker: The question of the Minister's silence arose in an accusation by someone else, which the Minister repeated. I do not normally take points of order during ministerial statements. Some points of order arose — not that which the Member has just raised, but that to which I referred. Members should keep to the normal order of business, and questions should be concise so that as many Members as possible can speak.

A Member: What about the answers?

Mr Speaker: I refer to everyone who speaks, whether they are asking or answering questions. It would be helpful if Members could be as concise as possible.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As an Irish Republican, I share the view of British Republicans that the monarchy is a costly anachronism that should be abolished.

Does the Minister agree — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr J Kelly: Does the Minister agree that the Act of Settlement of 1701 is the bedrock of the Union, the Church of England, Parliament and the independence of the judiciary because, by ensuring that no Catholic ever ascended to the British throne, and by preventing a future monarch from marrying a Catholic or bringing up children in the Catholic faith, it remains the last great repository of anti-Catholic prejudice in the

British Constitution? Will he further agree that the language of the Act of Settlement, which refers to papists and persons marrying papists, is offensive and a positive encouragement to lingering discrimination? Will he lend his weight — *[Interruption]*.

11.45 am

Mr Speaker: Order. There has been some misunderstanding. Questions on a statement should relate to the statement and not to issues surrounding the statement. I cannot allow the Minister to reply to the question that the Member has just asked because it does not relate to the statement — fascinating though that question may be, and one to which many Members would be delighted to respond. If the Member has a specific question on the statement about the jubilee celebrations, I will happily give him a chance to ask it, but I will not allow questions on other matters.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister's statement makes it difficult for Nationalists even to contemplate celebrating the jubilee. Will the Minister lend his support to the abolition of that bigoted Act?

Mr Speaker: It is perfectly understandable that the Member may wish to explain why he does not want to participate in the matter. However, that question does not relate to the statement.

Mrs E Bell: I welcome the enthusiastic statement on the Golden Jubilee celebrations. I hope that it will be a wonderful opportunity for all of us to celebrate it appropriately and that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will facilitate those celebrations as much as possible.

To the Minister's knowledge, has there been cross-community take-up of the Awards for All scheme, and has the invitation to participate in the awards been extended to the whole Province? Will the celebrations that are being organised complement those of the district councils, and are there any plans for councillors and Assembly Members, working together, to join the celebrations so that it appears that the Province's public representatives are celebrating?

Mr McGimpsey: We have had discussions with every council. Most have taken forward ideas, and many have produced budget lines. I am not familiar with all the details of the cross-community element. However, one of the events that I attended — the launch of the poetry competition — had a strong cross-community element.

There has been a widespread take-up of events throughout the Province, and every area and district council will be represented. It is a matter for each district council to determine how it liaises and works with Assembly Members.

Mr B Hutchinson: I welcome the Minister's statement. Has he been involved in discussions with the clerk of the course at Down Royal to organise an event? After all, horse racing is known as the sport of kings, and everyone knows of the Queen's commitment to horse racing since she was a young girl. If there is a block on having an event because of the fixtures, perhaps we could arrange for such an event to take place on a Sunday.

Mr McGimpsey: I have not been in direct contact with anyone at Down Royal. I am aware that horse racing is regarded as the sport of kings, and it is well known that Her Majesty and the royal family have a deep personal interest in that sport and have followed it all their lives. With regard to a celebratory horse race at Down Royal, I do not know how things stand. That is not a matter for me.

Rev Robert Coulter: I commend the Minister and his Department on the statement. Can the Minister describe the Department's award scheme and explain why there was such an early closing date for it?

Mr McGimpsey: Rev Robert Coulter refers to our in-Department non-lottery scheme. The Awards for All scheme is still open — it has not closed — and will continue. We launched our non-lottery scheme with some £200,000 for grants ranging from £500 to £5,000. It is a small grants scheme and in keeping with the themes agreed with the palace — themes such as the Commonwealth, looking forward as well as back, community service and a giving thanks celebration.

We have had a large number of applications, and we need to be able to assess them in detail. Since the budget does not cover all the applications, I can make a case for further funding. As I have said, this is not about money. People want to celebrate, and whether they get a grant or not, they will go and celebrate. Some of the schemes are for street parties organised by primary schools. This is about small events, people coming together and celebrating and a sense of community. It is also about other themes such as giving thanks. The grants scheme in itself will not be the index of how many awards or events come though. Ultimately there will be far more events than awards, because that type of enthusiasm is in the Province.

Rev Dr William McCrea: If the Minister were to be judged on the criteria he has set, degree of creativity and imagination, this programme would not even get a pass mark, never mind a credit or distinction. His programme is a failure. The Minister must take up the decision of the Assembly and give the children the right to a proper memento of Her Majesty's illustrious 50-year reign.

When the Minister is not busying himself playing hokey-cokey with IRA/Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness on the front of the 'News Letter' in preparation for

evensong in Armagh, perhaps he could practise the new words of an old song:

“We are busy doing nothing,
Working the whole day through,
Trying to find lots of things not to do.
We are busy going nowhere;
Isn't it such a crime,
I'd like to be a Unionist,
But I really don't have time.”

Surely this sums up the Minister and the programme before us. I note the cries from his Sinn Féin supporters — that is no surprise. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Invitations from other Members for the Member to convey his question in a song are not appropriate, even though this particular Member could do it extremely well.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Thank you for that vote of confidence, Mr Speaker. It is a general vote of confidence from the public of Northern Ireland.

Coming back to the memento, I ask the Minister to take the matter raised in the Assembly seriously. Some may consider it a waste, but if the work is done now and the schools and children contacted — those who want to be — this would be the proper way to mark the illustrious reign of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II.

Mr McGimpsey: Dr McCrea says he is disappointed with the programme, yet he does not know what the programme is. I gave only some examples. It is unfortunate that the 260 people who are organising events should be treated to that sort of criticism from Dr McCrea — that they all have to try harder. *[Interruption]*.

Rev Dr William McCrea: It is criticism of a “do nothing” Minister.

Mr McGimpsey: Mr Speaker, I had hoped that this debate would not descend to this level. Of course, I should have realised that Rev William McCrea was in the Chamber. When I made reference to setting the tone, I was indeed referring to some things that have been said to me by Dr McCrea.

The themes we are discussing exhort that the Golden Jubilee be relevant, appropriate, leave a legacy, keep within reasonable cost. Those are the themes set down by Her Majesty — they have been agreed for some time — and they are to be realised through celebration, giving thanks, service, community, looking forward as well as back and the Commonwealth.

We have looked at the prospect of celebrating the jubilee through the schools, and if Dr McCrea had asked simply whether I agreed that all children had the right to a permanent souvenir of the jubilee, then, of course, the answer would have been “Yes”. It is vital, however, that the souvenir should be in keeping with the spirit of the jubilee celebrations and the Queen's wishes. We have considered medals, and I have

samples of mementos that seem to be dear to the hearts of some. No decision has yet been made. However, the cost ranges from £350,000 to £1.25 million, and I am afraid that the cheapest one looks like something you would want to take the paper off to eat the chocolate.

I wanted the children in our schools to receive something of value, something that they would appreciate. For example, one of the ideas was a small bursary per school so that each could celebrate the jubilee in its own creative and imaginative way. I have investigated that idea, and I can find the budget channel for that.

Another idea was the production of a CD-ROM that would provide educational interest to children. We do not simply want a memento. This is not about sentiment. It is about looking forward and giving something of value to our children. The CD-ROM, for example, can provide a permanent educational resource for all schools, including information of specific relevance to the Golden Jubilee, perhaps looking back at Northern Ireland 50 or 25 years ago as well as looking forward, which is a key theme.

An educational outreach resource was another idea. For example, Museums and Art Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI) will hold some exhibitions, and I have mentioned one or two — for example, the Queen's loan of the Leonardo da Vinci drawings. We could organise it in the same way as the 'Kings and Conflict' exhibition, through educational outreach and perhaps through education packs.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can I dissent from my Colleague's call for Mr McCrea to burst into song? Nonetheless, the Minister will be aware that my Colleagues and I are not avid supporters of the British royal family. Indeed, Mr McGimpsey did acknowledge that many people in the North, perhaps 50% of the population, do not share his sentiments with respect to unstinting duty and that kind of thing. In other words, Irish-minded citizens will not share in the celebrations. Seamus Heaney said

"No glass of ours was ever raised

To toast the Queen."

Can the Minister assure us that he will draw the line where there is an attempt to impose this subject on those who have no interest? I also seek a commitment from the Minister that he will use his considerable influence in his liaison with Belfast City Council to adopt a more even-handed approach with regard to funding celebrations for St Patrick's Day as well as the jubilee celebrations.

Mr McGimpsey: Of course, the point of all of this is that it is entirely voluntary. I do not agree with Mr McElduff's figure of 50%. It is much higher than that. Indeed, in the kingdom as a whole it is an overwhelming majority, and there is a clear, strong will, which is

evidenced by the number of applications we have received and the number of events that are being planned. They will be published in our 'Golden Jubilee Diary of Events' and Mr McElduff can also see that the response is high and strong.

He spoke to criticise the words "enforcing" and "imposing"; nothing is being enforced or imposed. This is an opportunity for everyone to celebrate. Even if one's outlook prevents one from celebrating, it is an important historic event. It is the fifth time in 1,000 years that there has been a Golden Jubilee. It is something for us all to celebrate in our own way. That is the point of the award schemes. It is certainly not something that Republicans or Nationalists should feel they should oppose. We can all enjoy it, because it looks to the future not just the past.

12.00

St Patrick's Day is a different matter. As Members will be aware, Belfast City Council required that the organisers of the Belfast St Patrick's Day celebrations adhered to the criteria laid down by Down District Council. They refused, and that was why the application failed. Had they agreed to the criteria, such difficulties would not have arisen and there would not have been the failed court cases.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the wide-ranging and inclusive nature of the Golden Jubilee proposals outlined by the Minister, which respect the Queen's wishes. I regret that some people have attempted to politicise the event. I welcome particularly the suggestion of a CD-ROM, which, using new technology, would enable children to celebrate the event and to learn through the occasion. Will the Minister agree to consider a commemorative scroll celebrating the Golden Jubilee, which could be designed centrally and distributed efficiently by CD-ROM? It may then be possible for every child who so wished to receive a personalised scroll so that he or she could celebrate the Golden Jubilee and retain a memento of the occasion.

Mr McGimpsey: A scroll is something that we are also considering. Several ideas have been floated — for example, a jubilee medal, a scroll, a CD-ROM, schools' bursaries and so forth. Some people have even suggested mugs, pencil cases or pens. There does not seem to be a big difference between the costs of each item. I have set up a jubilee advisory group, which has been in operation since July 2001. I shall take that group's advice, but Mr Beggs's idea is under discussion.

Mr Gibson: Is the Minister aware that his truculence of last week has gained my party seven members? They felt insulted by his behaviour. They found it to be almost an act of disloyalty to the Queen. Just as people received a memento at the time of the coronation, they make the legitimate demand that their grandchildren

receive a memento of the fiftieth anniversary of the Queen's accession. The Minister says that this is not about values or beliefs; then he wisely used the word "celebration". Is the Minister not aware that this celebrates the brilliant concept of a constitutional democracy and recognises unstinting work over 50 years? Is it not befitting that this Government gives every child a memento for the future?

Mr McGimpsey: First, I want to reiterate what I said in my statement. Mr Gibson spoke of "truculence" and claims that his local branch has now increased by seven members — that is probably a threefold increase.

From those benches — *[Interruption]*.

As I said in my statement — and I reiterate it for the benefit of Mr Gibson — I kept a silence, motivated entirely by my determination to comply with the wishes of Whitehall Departments and the palace. Mr Gibson stated that I said that this was not about values or beliefs. I did not say that.

Mr Gibson again asked the question — and I thank him because this is getting finally to the question. It is the question that I have already asked myself publicly twice this morning, and answered myself. I asked: "Do I believe and agree that all schoolchildren have the right to a permanent souvenir of the jubilee?" The answer is yes. I have said that twice already, and I am now saying it for the third time. Mr Gibson clearly missed the answer on the first two occasions, as he missed what I said previously when he described it as "truculence".

I had hoped for a degree of decorum in this discussion — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McGimpsey: — bearing in mind the important subject that we are talking about — the fiftieth anniversary of the Queen's accession to the throne. That is an important event historically, and an important event on several other levels, not least in relation to values and beliefs.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the fact that the Minister has confirmed that it is his view that all schoolchildren should receive a permanent souvenir to mark the Queen's Golden Jubilee. I welcome also the other practical suggestions that he has made — and is considering — for schools and schoolchildren.

Given the high rate of response in applications to the grant scheme from those people who are not happy to accept lottery funding, will the Minister provide an additional tranche of funding to reward the efforts of those who are attempting to organise events throughout Northern Ireland?

Mr McGimpsey: The Awards for All scheme is still open. It has not been curtailed, and there is no

closing date. Mr Kennedy is referring primarily to the non-lottery scheme that I, through the Department, set up for those people, organisations and groups who have a moral objection to applying for, and receiving, money from the lottery because of the gambling component. A criteria for the non-lottery fund will be that groups that have a reservation about using lottery money will receive priority. We are still assessing and working our way through the applications.

The scheme is heavily oversubscribed. However, I believe that I can make an argument for further support and resources. It would be wrong for me to make promises, because I am not in a position to do so. I repeat again, however, that I believe that I can make a strong argument for obtaining further resources to supplement the non-lottery fund.

Mr Poots: I regret the tone of today's discussion. However, it is the Minister who has set the tone, and it was the Minister who set the tone last week with the comments that he made.

This proposal was in the pipeline for a long time, and it was put before the House before the death of Princess Margaret. Had the Minister genuinely wished to have the motion withdrawn, he could have spoken to the proposer and advised him of the situation. Instead, he chose to make a political point out of it.

Is it not the case that in his contribution today the Minister is using bombast and attacking the Democratic Unionist Party to cover up the fact that he is doing nothing? He said that he is aware that the idea of giving every schoolchild a commemorative memento is being floated. It is not an idea that is being floated, it is a resolution that has been passed by the House. He is choosing to ignore that resolution. What is the Minister doing to move that resolution forward? What consultations has he had with other Departments? Has he looked to the private sector to help to supplement the funding that is required to carry out the will of the House?

Mr McGimpsey: I do not want to go over old ground as far as setting the tone is concerned. However, I could repeat what I have just said to Mr Gibson. It is tiresome of Mr Poots to repeat the same shibboleth, which I reject entirely, and with which any reasonable person would not agree. He said that I attacked the DUP. I neither attacked nor criticised the DUP. We shall take the matter forward in a spirit of goodwill. Mr Poots also accused me of doing nothing. I have listed what we have done since July 2001.

Mr Poots: Nothing has been done about a memento.

Mr McGimpsey: I have explained the situation concerning a memento. I believe that every schoolchild has the right to receive a souvenir. I have told the Member that we are considering that. I have even managed to bring in some examples to show him how seriously we are taking the matter and how we are addressing it. We have received samples and quotations.

The memento could take the form of a CD-ROM or a bursary for every school. The latter would provide a legacy to allow each school to determine, in its own creative and imaginative way, how it can provide children with a souvenir to make the event memorable. It has been proposed also that linkages be created through the Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI) to provide educational packages. That mechanism was used previously for the 'Kings in Conflict' exhibition, at which educational packs were provided for schoolchildren.

There is a range of ideas. However, the important thing is that we leave a legacy. That is one of Her Majesty's requirements. That legacy must be of value and should follow the themes of the Golden Jubilee. It should be relevant, appropriate, leave a legacy and be kept within a reasonable cost. It should follow the themes of celebration, giving thanks, service, community, looking forward as well as looking back, and the Commonwealth. The ongoing discussions must determine whether that type of memento or souvenir fulfils those aforementioned requirements, or whether it should take another form. I have mentioned already some of the ideas that we are considering through our own jubilee advisory group, which was established last year and which is advising the Department and me on the matter.

Mrs I Robinson: The Minister would agree with me that it would be unfair to deprive the vast majority of schoolchildren in Northern Ireland of a memento, when they would welcome one. I say "vast majority", because the gauge is that some children might not accept it.

The Minister mentioned certain events, which included the construction of a special garden in Newtownards designed for curriculum-based activities that will also cater for people with special needs, the elderly and pre-school children. I welcome that permanent feature in the constituency, which I represent in the House and in another place. Can the Minister provide me with more details of the location, and how the land was made available for that purpose?

Mr McGimpsey: I agree entirely that it would be wrong to deprive schoolchildren of a memento because of the objections of others. As I have already indicated, schoolchildren have a right to a permanent souvenir.

Several schemes have been proposed for Newtownards. Mrs Robinson represents Newtownards in the House and in another place. I live in Newtownards and have done so all my life. I am happy to share the information that I have on Newtownards with Mrs Robinson.

12.15 pm

Mr Paisley Jnr: Most Members on this side of the House are astounded by the Minister's revisionism, given his comments in the Chamber last week. He did not keep his counsel as he claims to have done in his

statement. Last week he made a comment that unfortunately cast a sad tone on what should have been a happier topic. The comments on page 1 of his statement further cheapened and party-politicised the matter. Only those who freed Mountbatten's killers could, in the same breath, profess that their loyalty is better than that of others.

In the depths of his statement, the Minister refers to "creativity and imagination". Does he agree that the opportunity for a more tangible and permanent tribute should be seized with both hands? Does he agree that a permanent motor sport racetrack or, as the Assembly agreed last week, a permanent memento that could be put in the hands of all the children of Northern Ireland, would be a more fitting tribute to Her Majesty and her gracious service to this nation than the one-off, short-term, one-day events that are planned?

Mr McGimpsey: I am unsure whether the applicants for funding for what Mr Paisley Jnr describes as "one-off, short-term events" would agree that those events are worthless. As for revisionism, Mr Paisley Jnr is a master of revisionism. He suggested that there be a permanent souvenir, but, as I repeated several times this morning, one of Her Majesty's stipulations is that there be no undue public expenditure for the programme.

A racetrack, which was suggested, would cost many millions of pounds. To build a racetrack would create strong reservations in the palace, because that would contradict the stipulation that there be no undue expenditure. The Department is considering the need for a racetrack through another device, the strategy for motor sport racing, which will be published later this year. That will determine the needs of the sport and whether the sport needs a purpose-built racetrack or the refurbishment of existing racetracks.

I have stated my position about the provision of a permanent souvenir. That should happen in accordance with the stipulations laid down by the palace and Whitehall Departments, and I will adhere to those stipulations. I need comment no further.

Mr S Wilson: I hope that we can rely more on the Minister's comments today than on his statement. On page 1 he states that he kept a dignified silence last week. However, Hansard reports half a column of speech by the Minister, part of which is a political attack on a motion that was tabled in a dignified way by my Colleague Maurice Morrow. The Minister's words were not memorable, but I thought that at least he would remember that he spoke, even if no one else did. He has been around the House today on the subject of a personal memento for schoolchildren. The House, by a majority, passed the motion that there should be a personal memento. The Minister has spoken about the costs of a memento. He spoke about providing CD-ROMs and other types of personal mementoes for schools.

Will the Minister accept the will of the House that each child who wishes it should have a permanent and lasting memento? Is he so in hock to the Minister of Education, whom he seems quite happy to swing with and play hokey-cokey with, that he will not do anything to offend him, and hence will try to avoid the question of a personal memento? As far as the total cost is concerned, a figure of £200,000 has been given, but other events are mentioned that have not been costed. What is the total cost and total budget in the Minister's Department for jubilee events?

Mr McGimpsey: Sammy Wilson, not for the first time, is one of the Members who did not get beyond page 1 of my statement. He said that my words last week were not memorable; clearly they were, because he remembered them.

With regard to the memento, I have covered this issue over and over again. The question was not forthcoming so I had to ask it myself, once, twice, three times, and I will do it again: "Does the Minister agree that all schoolchildren should have the right to a permanent souvenir of the Jubilee?" The answer is yes. What type of memento or permanent souvenir should that be? We are working on that, and I will bring forward ideas to the House in due course. We have set up a jubilee advisory group, and it is important that the views of people who are working voluntarily to support the jubilee should be listened to.

I have indicated, ad nauseam, what the budget line is for non-lottery funding, and lottery funding is a matter for the lottery distributors. The scheme is called Awards for All, and there is no fixed closing date, so groups can continue to apply. I repeat for those who missed it — and I am repeating it for the third, fourth or fifth time — that I can make a strong case for further resources for non-lottery funding. That will allow people who have a moral objection to the lottery, because of its connections with gambling, to come forward and not be disadvantaged.

BUDGET BILL

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled. Therefore I propose, by leave of the House, to group the seven clauses, followed by the four schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES (PRESERVED RIGHTS) BILL

Second Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Personal Social Services (Preserved Rights) Bill (NIA 4/01) be agreed.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim go dtugtar a Dhara Céim don Bhille Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta (Cearta Forchoimeáda).

Is í aidhm an Bhille seo an 1,700 conaitheoir i gcúram cónaitheach san earnáil neamhspleách agus i dtithe altránais ó roimh Aibreán 1993 a thabhairt faoi na socruithe bhainistíocht cúraim chéanna le cónaitheoirí eile tí cúraim.

Mar a chuir mé in iúl do Chomhaltáí inné, mhol an Coimisiún Ríoga ar Chúram Fadtéarmach do Dhaoine Scothaosta go mbreithneodh an Rialtas ar chóir íocaíochtaí ceart forchoimeáda i leas sóisialta a thabhairt faoin chóras mhaoiniú cúraim phobail atá ann ó 1993; nó an bhféadfaí teacht ar réiteach éigin eile le haghaidh a thabhairt ar easnamh mhaoiniú an ghrúpa sin. Chomh maith le comhchomhairle an Choimisiúin Ríoga, chuathas i gcomhchomhairle go háitiúil faoi na roghanna. Bhíothas den bharúil tríd is tríd gur chóir go n-aistreofaí freagracht as cásanna ceart forchoimeáda go gnáthshocruithe bhainistíocht cúraim na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta.

The aim of the Bill is to bring approximately 1,700 residents in independent sector residential care and nursing homes since before April 1993 into the same care management arrangements as other care home residents.

When the current community care arrangements were introduced in 1993, some 9,000 people in independent sector residential care were exempt from new health and social services funding and care management arrangements. Instead, they acquired a preserved right to an enhanced rate of income support to pay for their residential accommodation, and health and social services boards and trusts were barred from taking responsibility for the care management arrangements for these residents in all but a few limited circumstances.

I informed Members yesterday that the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly recommended that the Government consider whether preserved rights payments and social security should be brought within the post-1993 system of community care funding, or whether some other solution could be found to address the shortfall in funding experienced by that group. As well as the Royal Commission's consultation, further local consultation on the options

was carried out. Overall opinion supported a transfer of responsibility for the preserved rights cases into normal health and social services care management arrangements.

The Bill is being brought forward to transfer responsibility for the preserved rights cases into health and social services trusts' normal care management arrangements from April 2002. It is considered inequitable that these residents should be treated differently from those who entered the care system after April 1993. The Bill provides that where a trust has been unable to assess a person's need for services before the appointed day, it assumes responsibility from that day until it makes whatever arrangements are considered necessary, or until the person notifies the trust that he or she does not want to be provided with services. Regulations will also be brought forward to enable trusts to recover all or part of any payments made in these circumstances.

In relation to the disclosure of information between the Social Security Agency and the boards and trusts, the Bill specifies the type of information that can be shared, and with whom. That exchange will enable more effective identification of the relevant residents and ensure that when the trusts assume their responsibilities, no one slips through the net.

The Bill also contains a provision requiring the Department for Social Development to exercise powers under the relevant social security legislation so that provisions relating to higher rates of income support and jobseeker's allowance, payable to people with preserved rights, will cease to have effect on the relevant day.

The final clauses of the Bill contain technical and formal provisions relating to the commencement and interpretation of the Bill. That will enable the Department, by regulations, to make any necessary or consequential provision.

In summary, the Bill is targeted at ensuring that those individuals in care homes since before April 1993, and in receipt of higher rates of social security benefits to pay for their accommodation, are brought into the same health and social services care, assessment, management and funding arrangements that apply to other home care residents. These residents will, therefore, for the first time, receive an appropriate care assessment to determine the level of care required and whether their current arrangements are fulfilling those requirements, or if some further, or different, support is needed. They will have the benefit of health and social services contract and care management arrangements for the first time, and they will also have flexibility to consider and explore other care management options, if deemed more appropriate.

Members may have points to raise, and I will deal with them, if I can, in the course of the debate.

Mr Speaker: I have received no requests to speak and will put the question to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Personal Social Services (Preserved Rights) Bill (NIA4/01) be agreed.

Mr Speaker: The House will now, by leave, suspend and resume at 2.00 pm with a statement from the Chair about the resignation of a Deputy Speaker.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00pm

SIR JOHN GORMAN: RESIGNATION AS DEPUTY SPEAKER

Mr Speaker: It is with much regret that I advise the House that Sir John Gorman has decided to step down as Deputy Speaker of the Assembly. He will, of course, continue to serve the Assembly in his capacity as an Ulster Unionist Assembly Member for North Down. I would like to take this opportunity to pay my own tribute to Sir John and to convey to him my gratitude for his assistance to me as Speaker.

For almost two years, Sir John has made his own distinguished contribution to the Chair of the Assembly. His dignity, patience and good humour, as well as his firmness when required, have added considerably to the conduct of debate in the Chamber. I know that I speak also for the other Deputy Speakers, Mr Donovan McClelland and Ms Jane Morrice, when I say that he has been to all of us a most congenial, thoughtful and supportive Colleague.

Sir John had wide practical experience of chairmanship, which equipped him well for his role as a Deputy Speaker. From 1996 to 1998 Sir John was Chairman of the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue, which was established as part of the negotiations that led to the Belfast Agreement. However, that was merely the most recent and perhaps the most public of his many roles of public service, which extend right back to his front line and highly decorated military service in the Irish Guards during the second world war.

Sir John's first experience of this House was when his father brought him to its opening in 1932. Many Members will be aware that Sir John is now the Father of the House. That is a particularly fitting title for him. He is the Father of the House not only in age, but, more importantly, in dignity and distinction. He has earned the respect of Members from all sides and, in his capacity as Deputy Speaker, has entertained many guests from overseas and represented the Assembly, most notably, perhaps, at the historic Tynwald ceremony in the Isle of Man. Sir John has been a splendid ambassador for the Northern Ireland Assembly. I am most grateful to him for his help and support and for his friendship, which I value greatly.

Sir John, I thank you, and I wish you all that is good.

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): I associate myself and my Colleagues with all the Speaker's comments about Sir John — his service, his character and the manner in which he discharged his duties here.

Six years ago, when several of my Colleagues and I approached Sir John with a view to his developing a political career, he had a distinguished record in public service, the army, the police, aviation and the Housing Executive. He was replete with honours and age. Nonetheless, he was prepared to start an entirely new venture by coming forward as an Ulster Unionist elected representative in the Forum. He found himself pitched immediately into the deep end in the Chair, where, I have the temerity to suggest, he had even less experience than you, Mr Speaker, when you found yourself in a similar situation. Despite that, he conducted himself admirably, won the respect of all those who participated in the Forum and did an extremely good job.

He continued that service as Deputy Speaker in a way that has earned him the good opinion of all Members. I would be surprised if any Member did not have a warm feeling for him and did not, rightly, regard him as a friend.

Members understand the circumstances that have led Sir John Gorman to stand down as Deputy Speaker. He is to have a minor operation in the not-too-distant future, for which the House conveys its best wishes to Sir John. The Assembly looks forward to his return to continue the excellent service that he has given to the House and to the people of Northern Ireland.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): Mr Speaker, you spoke in a fitting and effective way, on behalf of the House, in paying tribute to the enormous contribution that Sir John Gorman has made to the Assembly. It is just one further instalment in his distinguished contribution to public life, both to the Assembly and to the people of Northern Ireland. Sir John brought colour and humour to the Chair. He is a man with no sides to him — he deals with everyone in a straight-forward manner. He is a man of honour in his dealings with all parties and with all Members of the House.

I shall miss him in the Chair. I have missed him in the Chair in the past, especially when he has been asking me questions from the Floor. He will be missed in the future. Members understand and appreciate the circumstances that force him to concentrate more on looking after himself and his constituents than on looking after all of us in the Chamber. We appreciate Sir John's distinctive contribution. We look forward to continuing to work with him and to enjoying his full membership of the House.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I wish to associate myself with your remarks, Mr Speaker, and those of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. It is a long time since I first met Sir John in the famous town of Ballymena, which he knew very well. He was a distinguished police officer there. However, he never had the privilege of arresting me.

I knew him well. I remember when he was chairman of the Housing Executive. He visited a certain housing estate. Many of his co-religionists lived on that housing estate. We had an interesting time. Many times, we have exchanged some of the wonderful things that were said to him as chairman of the Housing Executive and some of the more wonderful things that were said about me as Member of Parliament for the area. That was an interesting time.

I sat under his chairmanship of the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue with great pleasure. I remember the day when he told us that, in his time as a police officer, he always liked to have the sun shining into the eyes of those whom he was questioning. He looked down at the DUP side of the House and said that the sun is shining in the eyes of those men today. I never forgot that.

Sir John did extremely well as Chairman of the Forum. The DUP had its differences with him, as it has had in his time as a Deputy Speaker of the Assembly. However, there has never been any personal friction between us. We have had a warm, personal relationship. The House will be thinking of him and praying for him in the near future. I hope that, as Father of the House, he will be in the Chamber in the coming days to speak a fatherly word to us. The scriptures say that the Father chasteneth thee. Sir John did not chasten us too often. We respected the hand that wielded the cane.

Mr Maskey: I endorse the comments that have been expressed to Sir John and wish him well on behalf of Sinn Féin. The party expresses its gratitude for the sense of duty with which Sir John Gorman has carried out his work in the Chamber and in the Assembly since its inception. I agree with the Speaker's comments that when Sir John Gorman has met people from outside the Building, such as visitors from overseas, he has always represented the entire Assembly with aplomb, dignity, balance and not without a little style of his own. I share in the sentiments that wish him well in the near future. We are disappointed that he is unable to finish this session as Deputy Speaker. He has done the job to the very best of his ability and has treated everyone here with the respect that they all deserve as elected representatives. I hope that he will be able to spend a little more time as an elected representative and, of course, with his family.

Mr Ford: I also associate my party and myself with the sentiments expressed by you, Mr Speaker, and by other Members. It is unnecessary to repeat all that has been said about Sir John to endorse the tributes that others have paid. His work as a Deputy Speaker of the Assembly, which follows on from his work in the Forum, was a cap to a distinguished career of public service, a career that has been outlined in considerable detail.

Members of the Alliance Party opposition awkward squad on these Benches created certain difficulties for Sir John, as indeed they did for others in the Chair at times. Unfailingly, he responded to us with the courtesy, good humour and good manners that we know to be Sir John. I trust that he never took it personally — he certainly never gave the impression that he did. He always gave the impression that he could deal with whatever brickbats were thrown at him in a way utterly befitting of any Deputy Speaker of any body.

On behalf of the Alliance Party, I add our good wishes to Sir John for the future. We shall miss him in the Chair, but we shall enjoy his contributions from the Back Benches.

Mr C Wilson: On behalf of the Northern Ireland Unionist Party, I identify with the comments that have been made about Sir John on his retirement as Deputy Speaker. I got to know Sir John at the Forum. Indeed, my lasting memory of him was on a visit to the European Parliament in Strasbourg. We had the pleasure of accompanying him on the coach from the airport to Strasbourg. Sir John gave a running commentary about his wartime exploits, when the Germans were routed from the city of Strasbourg during the second world war, to which he made an amazing contribution. It was a memorable trip and coloured my view of the calibre and stature of Sir John Gorman. I wish him a quiet time on the Back Benches and all the very best for his future in the Assembly.

Mr Ervine: I concur with everything that has been said. It seems to me that Sir John Gorman's heart is good. It is not that long ago that I met him in politics. His dignity and integrity are absolute. I consider him, if he will allow me the luxury, not only to be a Colleague, but a friend. In many of the comments that I have heard, whether in public or in private, he is eminently a man of reconciliation.

I am not about to commiserate his passing from the Deputy Speaker's Chair, other than to celebrate that I have known him as a Colleague, and I know that he will be on the Back Benches. As the Father of the House, he may have some advice for us all.

Ms Morrice: On behalf of the Women's Coalition, I voice our appreciation for Sir John's role as Deputy Speaker. He brought dignity and honour to the Chair, and he will be sorely missed. While we appreciate him for his work, we welcome him to the Back Benches, both as Father of the House and as a friend. The most fitting tribute to him is that there are absolutely no back doors in Sir John.

Mr McCartney: I join with others who have expressed good wishes for Sir John. I first made his acquaintance many years ago, perhaps as many as 55 years ago — when I did not know really who Sir John

was — as a reader of a boys' magazine called 'The Champion'. The magazine had little vignettes of people who had done very special things in the war, and one of them featured John Gorman. I am not sure whether he was Captain or Lieutenant John Gorman, but he was certainly in charge of a tank. He came to the conclusion that his tank was not quite as well armed as the German Tiger tank and if he stood off he would not have been here in any other form. So, according to the account in 'The Champion', he ran his tank forward, jammed the gun of the much heavier tank so that it could not revolve and blow him to smithereens, and thus escaped to enjoy longevity and a period as Deputy Speaker of this House.

2.15 pm

Having escaped from the Axis powers into another — some people might say — nest of vipers — *[Interruption]*.

A Member: Speak for yourself.

Mr McCartney: Well, some people are more viperous than others. *[Laughter]*.

Having survived all that, he has entertained us with his companionship and, I have to say, a certain degree of eccentricity from time to time, but all of it has been in good part, and we shall certainly miss him in his role as Deputy Speaker. I have no doubt, however, that he will continue to puzzle many of us from the Back Benches, and we wish him everything of good fortune in the future.

Sir John Gorman: Mr Speaker and leaders of all the parties here, I cannot tell you how much all this means to me. I sometimes wonder, when I listen to all these things, who it is that you are talking about. Some of you have used a little more hyperbole than I deserve.

I am particularly pleased today that I have my dear wife with me — she is up in the Gallery — because she has had to suffer an awful lot of inconvenience, irritation and possibly boredom in listening to my tales of all of you when I got home. I promise you that, generally speaking, you all came out of it pretty well, and I am sure that she will think of you all now as the rather backward, bashful but affectionate crowd that you really are — and you really are, as far as I am concerned.

I think that you should know that today I met the surgeon who is going to do the great job on me, and — could you believe it — he has the splendid name of Gladstone. I asked him about home rule, and he looked a bit abashed because he is an Englishman — but he was pretty bullish about my chances, and I hope that I will be able to be back with you all in a matter of possibly eight or nine weeks.

I really feel that nothing that I could say would be appropriate at all to end my little thank you to you, other than to say how very happy I have been in the Ulster Unionist Party and how much I have been given support and attention by all its members, in particular by its leader, and to say also of the Speaker that we are very lucky indeed to have such a man at our head in conducting our affairs. Every one of you has been a friend as well as a Colleague to me, and I thank you. As Betty Boothroyd said a little time ago — and I am not going to quite say it — "time is up". Thank you. *[Applause]*.

Mr Speaker: To Sir John and Lady Gorman, our very best wishes, and our prayers for Mr Gladstone and the deftness of his hands.

GENERAL AMNESTY FOR OFFENCES FOR THOSE “ON THE RUN”

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the House that, as three amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List, we shall have to address the question of the amendments, how to handle them appropriately and the time limits.

There are three amendments; the first is in the name of members of the SDLP; the second is in the name of members of the DUP; and the third is in the name of members of the Ulster Unionist Party. They are in that order because that is the order in which they come in the motion. If amendment No 1 is moved, debated, voted upon and passed, it will amend the motion as outlined. Amendment No 2 can then be taken and if it were passed would amend the motion as amended by amendment No 1. If amendment No 2 is passed, amendment No 3 falls because the part of the motion to which it refers will no longer be in place. I remind Members of that so that, when they are considering how to vote, they will understand those facts.

I propose to allocate 10 minutes to the Member who is moving the motion and six minutes for the winding-up. Each person moving an amendment will have seven minutes to open and five minutes for the winding-up. All other Members will have five minutes in which to speak to ensure that as many Members as possible can speak in the time-limited debate. However, I realise that many Members may wish to speak for longer and that many Members who might like to will not be able to speak.

Mrs E Bell: I beg to move

That this Assembly considers that the Government’s proposal for dealing with those “on the run” constitutes a general amnesty for offences committed prior to April 1998, goes well beyond both the letter and spirit of the Good Friday Agreement and is inconsistent with both justice and international practice. This Assembly believes that the minimum requirement consistent with the agreement is that those wishing to avail of this measure should be required to acknowledge their guilt in court and be released on licence. This Assembly further believes that the Government should demand guarantees that those “exiled” by the paramilitaries can return to Northern Ireland in safety before proceeding with this measure.

I speak as a member of the Alliance Party and as someone who once worked with exiles.

The Government’s proposals for dealing with so-called “on the runs” constitute a general amnesty for all offences committed by paramilitaries associated with organisations that are recognised as observing a ceasefire before April 1998.

The British and Irish Governments introduced the proposal following the Weston Park talks last year. The stated intention is not to pursue outstanding prosecutions.

However, that term has not been defined, nor has a list of those eligible been published. In practice, people who have not yet been prosecuted for an offence are technically on the run, irrespective of whether they are in or outside Northern Ireland or whether the authorities are suspicious of them. Such distinctions will not stand up, even if the Government seek to make them do so. It is a general amnesty.

In a statement to the House of Commons on 24 October 2001, the Secretary of State committed the Government to implementing this package, including the amnesty proposals, in its entirety. He stated that it was the Government’s intention to address the issue by March 2002. However, they have not yet published the full details of the proposals.

It is opportune, therefore, that the issue be debated now, and I am happy to note that the other parties have finally wakened up to the issue. I may not agree with their amendments, but, nonetheless, I welcome them. My Colleague David Ford will deal with them later. It is also opportune to be able to make clear how the proposal will cause enormous hurt to the victims of numerous atrocities and undermine both the rule of law and any sense of justice.

In comparison, it is important to note that all prisoners who have been released were convicted in a court of law and thus had their deeds publicly noted. Furthermore, they are released on a licence that can be revoked if further offences are committed. The Alliance Party recognises that the issue of people “on the run” must be addressed. However, the current proposals are not a logical extension of the agreement; they are a quantum leap forward.

No one has been brought to account for a great number of the atrocities of the past 30 years. The interests and views of victims have been neglected during this process, and the failure to seek prosecutions will only increase victims’ sense of hurt. However, the most stunning aspect of these proposals is probably their complete failure to address the situation of those exiled from Northern Ireland by paramilitaries from all sides. Those who have been exiled are not facing conviction and imprisonment, but a death sentence.

In addressing this complicated and sensitive subject, I quote the Prime Minister’s words from the debate in the House of Commons last week.

“If we are genuinely concerned, as we should be, about putting the past to rest in Northern Ireland, one major part of that is people who were intimidated out of the country — the so-called exiles. Of course they should be allowed to return in peace. That, I think, would be a proper part of any significant undertaking in relation to the peace process. If the parties really support the peace process, they should support every dimension of it.”

There was a general consensus in the debate in Westminster Hall that the issues must be dealt with quickly.

In addition, several Members expressed concern about the fact that the issue of exiles had been allowed to drift. As my friend and former peace train colleague Prof Liam Kennedy said

“ We need to break the silence, at all levels of society here”.

As with the issue of victims, the two Governments have let paramilitary groups and their related political parties off the hook of playing their part to ensure that violence of all kinds ceases. If we all support the democratic peace process, we must work together as colleagues to eradicate all fear and intimidation from society. We must join with organisations such as the Maranatha Community and NIACRO, with its Base2 programme, to encourage Parliament to force concerted action. That would enable families that have been expelled or forced out of their homes and who wish to return to do so safely. I have worked with all those organisations in different ways, and I know the trauma, heartbreak and terror that families and young men have suffered and are suffering still. In the main they were not expelled because a community wanted it, as has been alleged. People were exiled because certain members of a community wanted it. These people see themselves as law enforcers and appoint themselves as such. They make the decisions and carry out the punishments, which, as we know, include horrific beatings followed by exile.

It is not right to say, as a Sinn Féin Member did last week, that if we had an acceptable police force, we would not have this problem. In my experience, paramilitary groups made their decisions about many youths who were already being dealt with by the police and the legal system, decisions made solely to demonstrate their influence and power in the communities.

If Sinn Féin is really concerned about policing, it has the solution in its hands. Its members should join the Policing Board and help to address the wrongs that they perceive, instead of standing outside and complaining.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClelland] in the Chair)

As Members know, I come from west Belfast. It is only since the Provisional IRA began to exert its illegal influence that the RUC started to be discredited there. The police are not, and were not, perfect. However, they are making strong attempts to deal with the problem, while Sinn Féin and others show no willingness to amend or change their views, work with others or attempt to achieve a balanced and efficient police service to which we can all subscribe.

The Maranatha Community and NIACRO and its Base2 programme can all provide graphic evidence of the trauma and hardship that exiles experience in Northern Ireland and abroad. We read about it every day in the newspapers. We must take note of the overwhelming evidence and listen to their advice that

people at all levels must work together to solve the problem. We must also note the finding of the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee's report 'Relocation following Paramilitary Intimidation' that a greater degree of focus and co-ordination is needed on the real problem faced by those who deal with people who have been forced from their homes by paramilitary intimidation.

The action plan of the Northern Ireland Executive must be expedited immediately. Furthermore, the British Government must no longer only talk about the problem; they must act to ensure that paramilitaries and their related political parties are involved fully in the process of halting their vile, violent practices.

2.30 pm

The number of citizens exiled is increasing, and that is unacceptable. A progressive step would be to make the necessary finance available to develop programmes such as the NIACRO programme for exiles. There must be an end to kangaroo courts and informal justice. I hope that the Security Minister, Jane Kennedy, is right in saying that with goodwill and support from all sides, particularly for the police in Northern Ireland, we will turn the tide. The tide must be turned before it is too late. I would remind her of this, when she speaks against deals being made; deals were made throughout the Good Friday Agreement talks on, for example, policing and ex-prisoners. It was felt that those deals were necessary at that time so that agreement could be reached and peace achieved.

The Minister's comments against the linkage of those two issues would make sense if both were to be given equal priority, which is clearly not the case at the moment. That issue is important as the Maranatha Community stated in item 16 of its report:

“It is now a widely-held belief amongst those caught up at street-level in the ongoing troubles that no serious progress can be made towards peace in Northern Ireland until this problem of exiles is addressed. It is a festering wound which can no longer be ignored.”

On a personal note, my husband and I were exiled twice, and not because of antisocial acts, unless a mixed marriage or helping different communities to work together amounts to antisocial behaviour.

It would be incredible if the Government proceeded with an amnesty for paramilitaries before first ensuring that those paramilitaries lift the threats against those whom they have exiled. It is not too late for the Government to reconsider their proposals and to put them forward in a manner that might just be more acceptable — although I am not sure about that. If the Government must proceed down this road, they must at least require those seeking an amnesty to apply individually, appear before a court and admit to the offences where appropriate. They then could be placed

on licence with suspended sentences, thereby providing safeguards in the event of further offences — the same system used for ex-prisoners. This approach would be more consistent with the agreement and would provide some small sense of justice and consolation for the victims.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please draw her remarks to a close?

Mrs E Bell: I sincerely hope that the Government do not ignore our debate, the debate at Westminster, or the report. Violence must no longer be a festering wound; instead it should become a dim memory.

Mr A Maginness: I beg to move amendment No 1: In line 2, delete "a general" and insert "an"; In line 2, after "for" insert "certain"; In line 3, delete after "goes" to "spirit" and insert "beyond the requirements"; and in line 4, delete all after the first "and" to end, and insert:

"that there should be further consideration of a mechanism whereby all those who were guilty of human rights abuses, from whatever quarter, including persons referred to as being 'on the run', should acknowledge and give a full account of their actions and recognise the hurt caused to and being endured by victims, families and the community. The Assembly further believes that those exiled by paramilitary organisations should be able to return to Northern Ireland without threat to their welfare by paramilitaries."

The SDLP has long been an advocate for human rights, and will continue to be so. It does not see human rights as some sort of cynical political tool, but rather as something precious that must be established firmly in the community and embedded in the very foundations of our new political order. Human rights must be applied universally, not selectively. Everybody is entitled to enjoy human rights and both state and citizen are obliged to uphold and respect them.

Thus, when paramilitaries offend basic human rights by killing or injuring people, they, like the state when it offends human rights, are obliged to acknowledge and give a full account of their actions to society at large and to victims and their families in particular. It is not for Republican paramilitaries to ignore their human rights abuses and seek a selective, limited amnesty exclusive to themselves. They are not entitled to benefit from a process from which other people are excluded. The origins of this "on the run" amnesty proposal is shrouded in secrecy, but it would appear that it arose around May 2000 when the Republican movement was engaged in a separate negotiation process with the British Government on decommissioning.

What was agreed was unclear. However, last year, at Weston Park, the issue became public and part of a side bar deal between Republicans and the British and Irish Governments. The SDLP was not party to that deal, and it advised both Governments that it was extraneous to the Good Friday Agreement. It was a separate deal by Republicans for the benefit of

Republicans. It was a self-serving deal to satisfy their internal political needs.

The selfishness and the arrogance of the Republican movement are exemplified in that deal. The movement is impervious to the greater needs of the whole community. We should be victim-centred. Victims in society must be acknowledged. The victims — Catholic and Protestant — of Republican violence must be acknowledged and affirmed. This proposal does nothing to acknowledge those victims and their deep hurt, a hurt that continues to pain many people.

That pain will continue to hurt unless there is some form of closure. That is why the SDLP amendment asks that further consideration be given to a mechanism for human rights abusers to acknowledge and give full account of their actions to victims and to the community. It is to be hoped that such a mechanism can acknowledge victims and can serve as a form of public accountability for all in society and for all human rights abusers. It is to be hoped that closure can then be achieved so that the victims — some of whom are alienated from the peace process and from the new political structures — can embrace the new political dispensation.

It is surely right that those who have been exiled by paramilitary groups, especially by Republican paramilitary groups, should be able to return to their homes and their homeland without fear, without let or hindrance. If paramilitaries seek an amnesty for themselves, surely it is common justice to grant an amnesty to those who were expelled by paramilitaries? Not to do so is rank hypocrisy.

Leaving aside the issue of amnesty, and leaving aside the motion tabled by the Alliance Party, the issue of the exiled stands on its own. Those who have been exiled by illegal paramilitary groups have the right to return at any time under the new political dispensation. To deny them that right is to deny them their human rights, because it is a violation of human rights to prevent people from enjoying their home and homeland. Even if the motion had not been moved, a fundamental injustice has been carried out against the exiled. It is right and proper that the House disapproves of that. Those who are responsible for expelling those people have a duty to say to them — especially in the present political circumstances — "Yes, come home. Yes, you have a right to come home, and, yes, you will be unharmed. We, the political representatives of the Republican — or Loyalist — movement, guarantee you that right to come home and live free from harm."

Mr Paisley Jnr: I beg to move amendment No 2: Delete all after "1998" and insert

"and calls on the Government to:

- (i) withdraw the offer of amnesty;

(ii) deliver the complete decommissioning of terrorist weapons; and

(iii) bring to justice those responsible for terror in Northern Ireland."

At the outset of this debate, Mrs Eileen Bell, the deputy leader of the Alliance Party, said it was absolutely incredible that the Government would bring forward the proposal that they have. The Alliance Party's motion is absolutely incredible. It is both contradictory and unworkable. That is why the DUP has tabled its amendment.

The motion claims that the Government's proposal goes beyond the Belfast Agreement. However, it goes on to endorse what the Belfast Agreement has done and to endorse the proposal that the Alliance Party says goes beyond the Belfast Agreement. Despite saying that it is inconsistent with justice, the Alliance Party goes ahead and supports the proposal. It supports it by suggesting that the way round it is probably to inflict another injustice and turn the due process of law and order on its head.

The suggestion that criminals should confess guilt and then be sentenced and licensed without a trial is inconsistent with any notion of justice or fair play, no matter who those people happen to be. The biggest contradiction came when Eileen Bell told us of the problems that she personally went through, with which we sympathise. She then suggested that we go to the people who put her and her family through that and seek an assurance from those criminals that they will now be nice people. We cannot, and should not, support such a proposal.

The amendment put forward by the SDLP still proposes an amnesty. The DUP opposes it for that reason. Mr Alban Maginness said that the amnesty was a "sidebar deal". I studied the papers emanating from Weston Park, and I did not see one word of condemnation from the SDLP of the communiqué issued by the two Governments at that time. If it was a sidebar deal, why did that party not condemn it at that time? Why did it then want to be associated with that sidebar deal? That is exactly what it did.

My party's amendment is consistent with the principles of justice and fairness. It seeks to withdraw the shameful offer of amnesty, to deliver complete decommissioning of terrorist weapons and to bring to justice those responsible for terror in Northern Ireland. No one in the Chamber should be opposed to those principles. It is in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland to ensure that people are brought to justice for their heinous crimes. It is in their interest that we should not have a "get out of jail free" card for people who have not yet even been convicted for those crimes. It is workable, and it should be backed by every right-thinking person

in the Chamber. To do otherwise is a further concession to terrorism in Northern Ireland.

An amendment will be proposed by the leader of the Official Unionist Party. He has little backing in the Chamber today. Although the first sentence of the UUP amendment backs part of the DUP's amendment, it is a denial that the hand of that party's leader is all over the offer that was made at Weston Park in the first instance. Let us face it: whether that party likes it or not, the amnesty is consistent with the spirit of an agreement that lets people out of jail free.

The people who would benefit from this are the same sort of people who tried to perpetrate an atrocious act in Coalisland yesterday. According to one newspaper, they got out of jail free in the first instance under the terms of the Belfast Agreement. The people who voted for that should hang their heads in shame today when they consider that the people whom they let out of jail free are probably engaged in continual terrorism.

This amnesty is a direct result of the Weston Park talks. David Trimble went to those talks claiming that decommissioning was the only issue to be resolved, yet he came away from those talks with proposals that weaken policing, were designed to demolish security and, most obnoxious of all, put on the table an offer of an amnesty to further terrorism.

Let us look briefly at the communiqué that those parties supported and did not condemn at the time. The British Government said that both Governments recognised that there was an issue to be addressed with the completion of the early release of prisoners. That means that it was not complete when the prisoners got out. It had to be addressed because other prisoners had to get out. The communiqué went on to say that only those organisations signed up to ceasefires should benefit. Ceasefires have been meaningless. Since 1998, 99 people have been murdered by the same paramilitaries who are supposed to be signed up to a ceasefire.

2.45 pm

According to the communiqué, the general amnesty would be a natural development. What would that natural development be? People engaged in terrorism and not yet convicted should be, in the words of the communiqué, no longer pursued. That is what they signed up to, and that is what their fingerprints are all over. Not only are Mr Trimble's fingerprints over it, his friend, Mr Donaldson, is also culpable because he was there as well. They signed up to it, agreed it and supported it at that time.

Let us consider the people who would benefit from such a terrible scheme: Charlie Caufield, who was wanted in connection with the Enniskillen bomb; Michael Rogan, who was wanted for the Lisburn bomb; Michael Dixon, who was wanted for the 1996 mortar bomb attack in

Germany; Liam Averill, the well-known transvestite who escaped from the Maze Prison; Owen Carron; Robert Campbell; and Dermot Finucane.

My Colleague reminds me that the La Mon House Hotel bombing took place 24 years ago this Sunday. A Member of the House was questioned in relation to that bombing. Nothing would now come of that because all those heinous acts of terrorism would be put to one side.

I must remind the House that in the 'Belfast Telegraph' on 1 August 2001 the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party said that the document's other proposals would be irrelevant in the absence of decommissioning. Given that there has been no decommissioning, I hope that people realise that David Trimble was wrong then when he said that this would be irrelevant. It is not irrelevant; it has come to fruition now, and I hope that the House supports the amendment.

Mr Trimble: I beg to move amendment No 3: In line 5, delete all the words after "this Assembly" and insert:

"calls on the Government to withdraw the offer of amnesty, insists that the Government adheres fully to the terms and principles of the Belfast Agreement and calls on the paramilitary-related parties to fulfil their commitments to the Mitchell principles of peace and non-violence."

I congratulate the Alliance Party in tabling the motion and for bringing the matter before the House. This is a serious matter. I will disagree with some of the terms of the motion, but that does not detract from the fact that it has brought this serious matter before the House. Other Members will also appreciate the significance of having a situation where the Alliance Party, who are not noted as opponents of proposals coming from the Northern Ireland Office, clearly condemns these proposals in unequivocal terms, and that is a good thing. I will offer what I think is a better way forward, but it is important to congratulate the Alliance Party for bringing forward the motion.

I am not clear about what the Government's precise proposals are, and I would be delighted if other Members were in a position to inform us about that. We have had several suggestions. Mr Paisley Jnr read a paragraph from the Weston Park communiqué, but that document was not clear about what was being proposed. It has been said that it is about legislation to deal with people who are "on the run". That is not the same as a general amnesty. A general amnesty would refer to all offences that had occurred, and would benefit people whether or not they are "on the run". However, that is not being proposed.

Part of the reason that we have not seen proposals emerge so far is that there is great difficulty in defining something that would relate to the handful of individuals who are "on the run", and not relate to others who are not. Anything that relates to a specific group will come into the category of private legislation; it would not be

a general public act. There are considerable technical problems in bringing forward such legislation. We do not yet know precisely what the provision is.

In so far as there is any argument in favour of dealing with people "on the run", the case presented is that people who are not "on the run" by virtue of having had their cases dealt with under existing legislation can now live in Northern Ireland and move about freely, whereas those who are "on the run" and have not had their cases dealt with are in a disadvantageous position.

In so far as there is a problem, it can be dealt with. Those who are "on the run" can come back, surrender themselves to the police, go before the courts and apply for early release under the early release scheme. Existing legislation provides for such cases to be dealt with. The Alliance Party's need for people to acknowledge their guilt in court can be met. There is also a provision for those offenders to be treated in the same way as others. An important general point is that the persons referred to should not gain any privilege over others, and should be treated exactly as others have been treated since the agreement.

Any measure that would apply only to terrorists who were "on the run", whether they came from one group, several groups or all groups, would be repugnant. Many in Northern Ireland would find a one-sided amnesty morally repugnant. The Government do not understand the strength of people's distaste for the proposals that they are introducing.

Mr Paisley Jnr's comments were, as usual, erroneous. Before, during and after Weston Park, and every time that the issue has arisen, we have urged the Government strongly not to follow that course.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Rubbish.

Mr Trimble: The Member might not believe it, but it is true.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Trimble: Those who advance their political careers through distortion and deceit can make any comment they choose. The facts speak for themselves. We have, at every occasion, advised the Government not to go down that course. We have said that it would be legally and morally wrong. Furthermore, if the Government take that course, it will do them enormous damage not only in the eyes of people in Northern Ireland but in the eyes of people in the United Kingdom generally. The Government know that the Ulster Unionist Party would fight such a proposal at every stage through Parliament.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Trimble: I speak in the knowledge that the actions of my Colleagues and myself in Parliament will carry much more weight than the comments of the

Members in the corner, who are conspicuous by their absence and their ineffectiveness on those issues — [Interruption].

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is entitled to be heard.

Mr Trimble: The SDLP amendment does not condemn clearly the amnesty proposal. Therefore, my party could not support it. The DUP amendment, on the other hand, contains the usual posturing, sets out an unreal position and does not engage with the existing situation. However, my party's amendment would deal with amnesty and provide for the operation of the judicial process. Furthermore, it would remind those parties that are related to paramilitary organisations of their commitments to the Mitchell principles, which deal with the continuing use of paramilitary violence, and, by extension, the issue of exiles. For that reason, Mr Deputy Speaker, I propose amendment No 3.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The issue of the "on the runs", as they have been called, is not, as the Alliance Party would argue, one of a general amnesty. The British Army, the RUC and the UDR have had a general amnesty for the past 30 years. The issue relates to the anomalies resulting from the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement. The proposals will sort out such anomalies, and are precisely in line with the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement and the logic of a peace process and a conflict resolution process.

Political prisoners have been released under the Good Friday Agreement. That was agreed, negotiated and voted on. In other words, we agreed that that would be the outcome. Anyone who is pursued, arrested, charged and sentenced, and who is a member of an organisation that is on cessation, would be similarly released. That is a colossal waste of time and money. However, that is not the key issue.

Any such pursuit of those individuals is fraught with dangers for the peace process. Can that be the intention of the proposers of the motion? I suspect not. However, it is the intention of those in the Unionist community who belong to the "No" camp. It is their intention to find, manufacture and exploit every opportunity to damage the peace process. For that reason, Sinn Féin is critical of the approach taken by the Alliance Party.

Sinn Féin's approach as a pro-agreement party is governed by the logic of a conflict resolution process. The matter will be resolved as a result of our engagement with the British Government. No other party has sought to resolve this matter, and no other party has brought forward any realistic proposals to resolve it. The issue challenges those who claim to be in the pro-agreement camp, because it must be dealt with and resolved. There is no benefit to any community in pussyfooting around. The issue must be resolved as

part of a conflict resolution process. It is interesting to contrast the opinions of the proposers of the motion and of the amendments with their silence about the British Army, the UDR, the RIR, the RUC or MI5 — no calls for court appearances there.

The SDLP surrendered on Patten's minimum requirement for those who would be transferring directly from the RUC. That is shameful given the RUC's clear track record of involvement in orchestrating murder campaigns, collusion with Loyalist paramilitaries and abuse of the civil rights of the Nationalist community over many years. I want to refute, on the record, Eileen Bell's revisionist comment that there was a time when the RUC enjoyed the support of the Nationalist community. Never in its history did the RUC enjoy the support of the Nationalist community. In the earliest years of its existence it reached the princely height of 19% support, and it plummeted from that point.

The RUC's track record compelled parties such as Alliance and the SDLP to make clear their position that if there were a general amnesty for the perpetrators of such nefarious activities as collusion with Loyalist murder squads or the orchestration of murder campaigns, they should also be brought to the attention of those who talk about justice. However, we find that the old agenda has "not gone away, you know". The old agenda is to close your eyes, institutionalise state violence and not to talk about it. Do not talk about the war if it means talking about the British Army, the RUC or the UDR. Do not talk about the war in those circumstances, but talk about Loyalists and the IRA — they are safe subjects.

Thus, we find the lopsided debate that has characterised those parties' approach to the peace process. In such circumstances, those people will be held to account by a community that will judge their double standards, and by a community that knows that if we are to have the truth, we must have the whole truth. If we talk about people being held to account, we must ensure that everyone is held to account, including the security services.

Mr C Wilson: My party will not be supporting the motion standing in the name of the Alliance Party. As usual, the Alliance Party has almost got it right. It looked at the situation and no doubt reflected a view, even among its supporters, who, as Mr Trimble pointed out, are not known for their strong Unionist views or traditions.

This agreement, and the amnesty that is being proposed as part of the Belfast Agreement, are so obnoxious that even the soft-bellied, slightly green Alliance Party has difficulty keeping the decent ordinary people who normally support it along the tracks of agreeing that this was what they signed up to in the Belfast Agreement.

3.00 pm

The Alliance Party got it right at the start of the motion by saying that this is inconsistent with justice and international practice. Everyone throughout the United Kingdom, and perhaps throughout Europe and further afield, knows that the stark reality is that Northern Ireland faced a 30-year terrorist campaign, yet President Bush and the Prime Minister tell us that they will carry out a programme of terrorising the terrorist and of making sure that there is nowhere for them to rest their feet. Northern Ireland has perhaps suffered most, certainly in Europe, yet the final indignity for the victims and the families of those who have been maimed and murdered by these terrorists is that the terrorists will now be given an amnesty. No doubt Mr Trimble is aware that this will be a total amnesty for all terrorist acts before 1998.

The Alliance Party got it right when it said that this was an affront to decency and democracy. However, it got it wrong when it said that this process and the Weston Park proposal had nothing to do with the Belfast Agreement and that it was not in the agreement. The Alliance Party must be aware that the first item on the agenda of the Belfast Agreement was the release of all unreconstructed terrorists — terrorists who had shown neither repentance nor sorrow for their crimes — and then to place the frontmen of those organisations into the heart of Government in Northern Ireland and to set about — with the complete acquiescence of Mr Trimble and his party — the destruction of the force that stood between the decent ordinary citizen, Catholic, Protestant, Unionist and Nationalist, and the men of terror represented by Mr Adams and Mr McGuinness.

Mr Deputy Speaker, we hear Mr Trimble's denial of Weston Park and that he had signed up to it. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr C Wilson: We are aware that after the Weston Park talks Mr Trimble and even Mr Ervine, who represents the PUP and who fronts the Loyalist paramilitaries, said that Weston Park was a bridge too far and that they could not endorse it. Mr Trimble's fingerprints are indisputably on the Weston Park document. When he came back he set about one of the demands on the 23-point plan of Weston Park; that was Mr Trimble's part of the deal. The bit that he had to implement was to put back in office — by signing the necessary papers for the North/South Ministerial Council — Mr McGuinness and Ms de Brún. He complied with the British Government.

He also sat by while the final nail was put in the coffin of the RUC, and he watched the military posts come down. Every item on the IRA wish list of Weston Park has been gradually fulfilled. Mr Trimble now tells us that he will stand against this. If he wants to show the true nature of his opposition to this — and

this applies to all the Unionists who participate in the Executive with Sinn Féin — he can tell the British Government that the day they introduce this legislation he and his Colleagues and all the Ministers represented in the Executive will no longer give any credibility to the House or to allow this charade to go on.

I come to the nonsense suggested by the Alliance Party that — on the word of Sinn Féin/IRA — these exiles can be bartered; that we can bring these people back and that they will come to no harm. No Unionist could believe any commitment made by Mr McGuinness, as there was a lady in the Bogside whose son was taken across the border —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr C Wilson: Mr McGuinness gave him a safe guarantee, yet he was murdered. This is an absolute nonsense.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Wilson, your time is up.

Mr C Wilson: Unionists must now remove themselves from a process that is bringing Northern Ireland rapidly to its knees.

Mr Ervine: It seems to me that Sinn Féin has admitted that it did not do a good job in the talks on the Good Friday Agreement. I thought that I did a wonderful job — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Ervine: In the talks there was a specific clause that dealt with the issue of prisoners — prisoners whom some people believed were political prisoners but whom others believed were representatives of criminality. Nevertheless, there was a specific section dealing with the issue. I did a good enough job. I offered the people, with all the moral nightmares that it caused, as much as they could dare take. The Republican movement is now saying — and it has been saying it consistently behind closed doors with the British and Irish Governments — that it is not enough. The Republican movement is saying that it needs not only to have its so-called prisoners on the run returned, without going through due process of law — albeit an adjusted process of law to take into consideration the abnormality of the society that we lived in — but to have a process of inquiries. As the Republican movement achieves amnesty, it requires members of the security services to step across the hot coals that Sinn Féin and other Nationalists have planned for them.

In answer to Sinn Féin's comment that they won't talk about the security services, I will talk about the security services but not, as it was suggested, from an anti-agreement point of view. I will talk about them from a pro-agreement point of view. Enough is enough. The Good Friday Agreement is in trouble, as we all

know. One wonders why the DUP does not support Sinn Féin when it asks for the return of prisoners on the run, because the two issues of amnesty and inquiry have the capacity to hole below the waterline all that we believed to be possible. I have no doubt about that. It is clear that Sinn Féin's hypocrisy in requiring amnesty for themselves, and demanding the full rigour of the law for others, is shameful.

In some respects it is like the situation when Gerry Adams was asked in the Felons' Club "Is that why 10 men died, Gerry — for cross-border bodies?" Sinn Féin's answer is "You think you are doing badly? Look at the state of those Unionists."

The process of continued agitation at Unionism, aiming at the cracks that exist in the Unionist community, offers to Sinn Féin easy pickings from the British and Irish Governments. Here is how it works: Unionism demands, Gerry Adams offers to supply. Of course, Unionism does not have anything to give, so a Government must pay the price. The more in dismay we seem to be, the higher the price that Sinn Féin can require. The greater the nightmare that we are in, the more the British Government believe they have to keep Sinn Féin sweet to get the sweeties that will allow at least some Unionists to believe that a peace is possible.

In our own hands, therefore, lies the reality of how the British Government parleys with Sinn Féin. Push John Reid out of the road and start taking these people on face to face. The first thing that those of us who believe in the Union need to tell them is that there cannot be any more. The Good Friday Agreement contains a reasonable enough system, given the nightmare that our society has come through, for anyone to step forward and be part of the community.

Had you said five years ago to one of these guys on the run for a double murder "I'll tell you what. Come you with me — we will go to the barracks. You will go to Long Kesh, Magilligan or Maghaberry, and you will probably spend six or seven weeks on remand; your trial will be sorted out; you will get slapped across the knuckles; and you will serve up to two years" — do you know what he would have said? He would have said "How do I sign on? How do I get to do that?" If I am aware of that, then Sinn Féin is aware of it, but Sinn Féin still does not get enough. *[Interruption]*.

I hope that there will be a degree of silence as I speak. I will leave you, Mr Deputy Speaker, with this thought. The issue of amnesty versus inquiry can — and will, if forced forward — hole the Good Friday Agreement below the waterline. Not everyone in the Chamber, perhaps with one exception, wants that to happen.

Ms McWilliams: There was a large student demonstration outside, so I apologise to the House and to those who spoke earlier in the debate for my lateness.

My party is concerned that the Alliance Party's motion is an attempt to simplify, unhelpfully, the complicated issue of outstanding prosecutions for offences committed before 1998. The Alliance Party wants to deal with the matter legally, but it is not solely a legal issue. It wants to link the issue to exiles but not to the wider context of security, law and order, political stability and the need for confidence building in a community that sorely requires it.

No matter how much we might want to put behind us the issues of outstanding prosecutions, exiles and continuing paramilitary and organised crime, they cannot be dealt with by a single wave of the legislative wand. There is no magic wand, as those who were involved in the negotiations know. It requires negotiation, political will, strong leadership and hard work on all sides. To assume that the issue lies at the door of the Government or the courts is to focus on one aspect only. That assumption betrays a sore misunderstanding of the nature of conflict resolution in Northern Ireland.

To demand — and it is a simple and foolish demand — that some of the "on the runs" should simply surrender themselves, approach the courts, admit their guilt, be sentenced and then released at the pleasure of the courts, is to live in fantasy land. We should know by now how unhelpful it is to tie issues together. That merely blocks progress on outstanding issues until somebody's demands are met.

I say to those who would prevent any resolution for those on the run until exiles are returned home, and to those who refuse to discuss the exiles issue until reforms of policing are introduced, that work must be allowed to continue in parallel on all those difficult issues. That has been the case to date, and it is why we have driven the process forward step by step, dealing with the issues in parallel, without making one demand in return for another.

We would have had no progress on policing, decommissioning, or the devolved Government that we now have, had we not adopted that approach, yet the Alliance Party is attempting to place another set of chains on the peace process. The origins of the proposals for those on the run are the Weston Park talks. The proposals were derived from a package of measures, with which not everyone was satisfied, as the First Minister pointed out. However, we should not take the proposals out of context. The agreement contained no explicit provision for those on the run, but those people must be dealt with one day. We must face up to the issue as part of the peace process, as other controversial issues have been faced.

We must deal with the deeds of the past. We recognise the need for truth and accountability, and there must be a proper discussion of the pros and cons of the methods of achieving that. However, this is not the

time for that debate. We urge all the parties to get involved in that process. Local groups have begun the process by building on good international practice.

The Women's Coalition is opposed to the exclusion and the intimidation of people from their homes. We recognise that it is not solely a current problem, it will continue for some time. There is no justification for such a situation in a democratic society. Reforms have been made to provide proper channels to deal with community problems and conflicts. However, as with decommissioning, we call on everyone with influence to use it to end the practice of exiling people. We must focus on practical justice, the justice that results from conflict resolution, which involves not only ending violence, but ending its causes.

The Alliance Party's suggestion for dealing with people "on the run", which has no precedent in justice or in international practice, is an assumption that "one size fits all". It does not, and that concept is simplistic. The SDLP's amended motion acknowledges the complexity of the issue and offers much more constructive and creative ways to resolve it.

Mr McCartney: There is nothing so corrosive of the human spirit as a sense of injustice. All those innocent people in Northern Ireland who have suffered at the hands of the murderous terrorists on both sides, but largely those of violent Republicanism, will undoubtedly feel betrayed. They will feel that the rule of law has been abandoned if — and this is how the UUP's amendment describes it — the Government's offer of amnesty is permitted to go forward.

3.15 pm

I listened to Mr McLaughlin attempting to equate the activities of the security forces with the sort of terrorists who are "on the run". I remind Mr McLaughlin and Sinn Féin of the schoolteachers who were dragged out and shot in front of their pupils, of the bread servers who were shot as they went into shops to deliver their wares, of the people who were "sorted out" at Kingsmill — 10 of them, gunned down by the IRA because they were Protestants — of Teebane, and of the members of the Irish Collie Club who were burnt alive by the IRA at La Mon. To talk about the perpetrators of those atrocities being engaged in anything that might be described as a war under the terms of the Geneva Convention is disgusting.

However, that is what Mr McLaughlin offers. What he also offers is a threat. Mark this: he tells the House that any pursuit of those individuals is fraught with danger for the peace process. What does that mean if it is decoded? It means that if Sinn Féin does not continue to get its way from a supine, abject, appeasing British Government, it might have to sabotage the peace process. By whom will it be made fraught, but by Sinn Féin, and why? The reason is that Sinn Féin, through

thick and thin, has managed to retain its weaponry. The real issue is decommissioning. The people who threaten the peace process if their insatiable demands are not met retain 99.9% of their weaponry, Semtex, Kalashnikovs and mortars, yet the leader of the UUP prattles on, down the wings of the Assembly, suggesting that decommissioning has taken place. Decommissioning will come back to haunt the Assembly and the UUP if there is anything remotely resembling decency, courage or guts when the Ulster Unionist Council meets to hear this man prattling appeasement.

Those people "on the run" are murderers and psychopaths who did not wish to face justice. It is unutterably wrong that the IRA continues to threaten people — telling them to leave their homes and warning them that if they return they will be murdered — while Mr Gerry Adams, the world statesman, the friend of Mandela, the confidante of Cuba and Castro parades himself about and claims that it is not the IRA that is using bullets, smashing ankles and kneecaps, wielding clubs or strapping people like Patsy Gillespie into a car loaded with explosives and forcing them to drive to a checkpoint. "Oh no", says Mr Adams "if the community wants them back, what has that to do with Sinn Féin or the IRA?"

Mr Mc Laughlin reached fresh heights of hypocrisy today. There was much wisdom in what Mr Ervine said today, though I do not often agree with him. It is alleged that there will be some sort of truth-and-reconciliation trade-off whereby those people "on the run" will be given an amnesty. However, there will be no trade-off for those in the security forces because wound licking from before 1972 has become an art form of Nationalism

There will be no reconciliation, no forgiveness and no peace while people like Mitchel McLaughlin and his ilk continue to ply their awful trade in Northern Ireland.

Mr Durkan: I support amendment No 1. The Alliance Party's motion is flawed. I concur with some of Ian Paisley Jnr's remarks. The motion's proposal that people should have to admit guilt before a court, be sentenced and have that sentence suspended is unworkable and deeply flawed on several grounds that we cannot support.

Amendment No 1 would also correct the motion, which misdescribes, in some ways dangerously, the nature of the two Governments' proposal. However, we still recognise the proposal for what it is, and we recognise particularly the fact that it is beyond the requirements of the Good Friday Agreement. Mitchel McLaughlin and members of Sinn Féin know that it is beyond the requirements of the Good Friday Agreement. If they felt that it was consistent with the agreement, it would be subject to judicial review. The two Govern-

ments would be taken to court, just as the Irish Government have been taken to court for failing to release those convicted of the murder of Det Garda Jerry McCabe. It is beyond the requirements of the agreement, and that is why it was negotiated at the May 2000 talks and subsequently at Weston Park.

Mitchel McLaughlin also said that Sinn Féin was the only pro-agreement party to address the issue and made much of the fact that his was the only pro-agreement party to bring forward proposals on it. However, he failed to mention that Sinn Féin is the only pro-agreement party whose members, representatives and officers will actually benefit from the proposal. That perhaps suggests why Sinn Féin was so singular in its interest and efforts in this area.

The SDLP did not pursue this issue at all at Weston Park. Contrary to the impressions given by Ian Paisley Jnr, our formal response to the two Governments' proposals of 1 August recorded that we had not pursued this issue at Weston Park and also pointed out that it was not a provision of the agreement. Similarly, we recognised the proposal for a review of the Parades Commission as entirely extraneous to the agreement. We are completely consistent on all those issues.

At Weston Park, we also paid much attention to the need that we saw, and still see, for judicial inquiries to deal with serious issues of concern in relation to past cases. We concentrated on seeking inquiries for those cases — Sinn Féin was concentrating on gaining these benefits for people on the run.

In the post-Weston Park package from the two Governments, the provision made for those "on the run" was the result of a sidebar deal. The Governments also made other provisions and commitments. The Governments said that the Weston Park package was a take-it-or-leave-it package. It was a comprehensive package to ensure the agreement's complete implementation.

Some parts of the package are moving forward. Two of them are entirely extraneous to the agreement: the review of the Parades Commission and the proposed amnesty for those "on the run". We have not yet seen other aspects of the package that are relevant to the agreement. Paragraphs 21 and 22 of the Weston Park package of 1 August contained a commitment to the implementation group, but we have not seen it. All parties wanted it, except for Sinn Féin.

When we pointed out that contradiction to the Governments, we were counselled with the observation from senior Government representatives that the problem is that our party does not have guns. That, as we have pointed out, is a counsel of cynicism. People need not be anti-agreement or Unionist to ask questions about the management of parts of the process. The Governments know where we stand on those issues.

Another reason why we particularly commend amendment No 1 to the House is that, unlike any of the other amendments, it properly addresses the issue of victims. That issue should be addressed in a meaningful way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has 10 seconds.

Mr Durkan: There is too much danger of a partisan approach to the treatment of victims being adopted. They are either patronised or ghettoised. We need a victim-centred approach, and amendment No 1 is unique in focusing on that requirement.

Mr Campbell: In supporting amendment No 2 in my name, I wish to make some comments. While awaiting the Government's deliberations in the next week or two, several Members have made much of their amazement, annoyance or astonishment at the outcome of the Weston Park talks and their further implementation. Mr Ervine's comments and those subsequently made by the Deputy First Minister almost made me think that after four years — eventually — we were getting to the point at which the light was coming on. When we give in to terrorists what do they do? They ask for more. There is an amazing thing. Many bigots, terrorists, arsonists and murderers are members of Sinn Féin. If they are let out of jail early they may say OK, but they still want a little bit more. Those who designed the deal that got terrorists out of jail early then say that they did not mean for it to be like the way it is. They thought that when the train was on the track and moving in a particular direction it might move slowly and that matters would move alongside the train. Now they complain because the Provos have jumped on board and want to put in more fuel to make the train go faster. All those who constructed the device, laid the tracks and put the train on those tracks now say that they did not want it to move so quickly. It is a bit late to start complaining four years later, as the First Minister has done. He waxed eloquently about how he and his party would trenchantly oppose all manifestations of the Bill when we see it. If that opposition at all resembles the trenchant opposition that I witnessed in the House of Commons when dealing with criminal justice, when I saw a series of amendments withdrawn time after endless time, I await the outcome with bated breath.

The Deputy First Minister and Mr Alban Maginness referred to a sidebar deal. Part of that means that people such as Liam Averill, a double sectarian killer, and Owen Carron, a Sinn Féin ex-Member of Parliament, both of whom are on the run, will be given an amnesty. A series of other people will be let out of jail. One of the First Minister's points was accurate. One option is that prisoners could give themselves up, return to jail for a few weeks and then be released. If the second option is a complete amnesty, why on earth would

prisoners accept the first option? He is correct in that respect. Therefore, why did he agree in the first place with the concept of early release of prisoners in the Belfast Agreement?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Campbell: If one plays with fire, do not be concerned if one gets burned. The First Minister is getting his fingers burned. He seems to be realising that the chickens are coming home to roost.

3.30 pm

When we see the terms of the Bill, we shall see the reality and we must resist it. Amendment No 2 will do that successfully, and I ask Members to support it.

Mr Nesbitt: Previous Members who spoke used the term "cherry-picking" to refer to the Belfast Agreement. My party has never wanted to cherry-pick. It wishes to see the full and accurate implementation of the Belfast Agreement. The agreement does not include an offer of amnesty, which is why my party is opposed to such an offer. The Belfast Agreement clearly outlines the terms, and that is why my party wants its full implementation.

Not only are exclusively democratic and peaceful means mentioned on page 1 but the opposition of any use or threat of force by others is mentioned. Retained arms, although predominantly silent, still threaten. That is why my party remains committed to full decommissioning. The Pledge of Office states that those in ministerial positions must be committed to

"non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means".

Weapons that are still held, even if they are predominantly silent, do not constitute a commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means.

Another aspect that Members referred to is mentioned in both the Belfast Agreement and the Mitchell principles, both of which we want to implement. I am sorry that Mr McCartney has left the Chamber. I wish that he had stayed because I like to exchange views with him eye to eye. The Mitchell principles refer to the absolute commitment and total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. When referring to my party, Mr McCartney talked about "prattling appeasement". He talked about the real issue of decommissioning. He has said that all we need is a mere form of words by which paramilitary parties can be treated like democratic parties. I hope that he reads the transcript of today's debate, because he is the hypocrite; he is prattling appeasement when he uses phrases such as "mere form of words". If anyone does not believe me, especially Mr McCartney, I invite him or her to read the 'Belfast Telegraph' of 1 May 1998, which plainly shows that. I do not accept Mr McCartney's accusation of prattling appeasement. He should take the mote out of his own eye before he accuses another Member.

When Mr Trimble was speaking, there were loud noises from the DUP. Of course, there was silence when Sinn Féin Members were speaking. They talked about — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Nesbitt: Let me make it clear that we fought the Weston Park aspect at every stage. Dr Paisley says that he wants to be the leader of Unionism. He said that he would be glad to have his Christmas dinner with an election under his belt — such prophecy. However, let me look at the DUP — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Nesbitt, you must address your remarks to the Chair.

Mr Nesbitt: I am addressing the Chair, but that does not preclude me from looking in another direction. As I look at the DUP Members, I remind them that they cannot listen. They said that there would be no talks until the IRA was defeated. They said that they had Ulster Resistance, which would smash the IRA. They had the Third Force and the Carson Trail. They had many things — *[Interruption]*.

Rev Dr William McCrea: What about the hokey-cokey?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Mr Nesbitt: The DUP delivered nothing. The DUP even said that it would not recognise Sinn Féin, but it recognises Sinn Féin all the time. The volume of DUP voices is remarkable, given that they cannot listen to what is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Surely the Member should continue his speech and say why he invited me to South Down when he was fighting the seat, and why he said that he was glad that I was there to help him to fight the seat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order.

Mr Morrow: I was interested to hear the Minister-in-waiting's speech. He seemed to get carried away, and was under the impression that the Deputy Speaker was down here rather than up there. As Mr McCartney says, Mr Nesbitt seemed to be slightly disorientated.

The DUP amendment goes right to the heart of the issue. The early release — or what is now known as an amnesty, which is an extension of the early release scheme — is a continuation of the Belfast Agreement. During his deliberations, Mr Trimble said that the UUP had warned the Government not to go down that road. Mr Trimble must have noted that the Government are not listening to him. I wonder why the Government would not listen to Mr Trimble. Could it be because this is the same Mr Trimble who said that the UUP would not negotiate with Sinn Féin before, during or after the

talks? The UUP did the opposite of what it said that it would do. No matter how silly the Government might be, that was not lost on them. They realised that to be gored by Mr Trimble would have the same effect as being gored by a dead sheep.

Mr Nesbitt is trying to make an impact on the Minister by ranting in such a way. He does not have to impress us by virtue of the fact that he will soon be the Minister. We will judge him when he gets into office and we will take him on when that day comes. However, he should deal with the real issues now. The answer to why Mr Nesbitt and Mr Trimble have no effect on the Government is simple, and Mark Durkan let the answer out of the bag. He said that the UUP do not have guns. That is the real issue. These guys over here have the edge — they have the real machinery. That is one of the reasons that my party insisted on a full and transparent decommissioning process. When Mr Trimble returns to the Dispatch Box, he may wish to note what some of the rest of us have noted.

In the House of Commons, on 24 October 2001, the Secretary of State said — *[Interruption]*. At least Mr Nesbitt has the guts to stay to listen, unlike his Colleague. The Secretary of State said:

“We and the Irish Government have now accepted that it would be a natural development of that scheme for outstanding prosecutions and extradition proceedings for offences committed before 10 April 1998 not to be pursued against supporters of organisations, now on ceasefire ... Both Governments have agreed to take such steps as are necessary to resolve the issue as soon as possible, and in any event by March 2002.”

The scheme to which the Secretary of State referred was the early release scheme. The next words are the important ones:

“Piece by piece the Belfast agreement is taking shape.”

That is what it is all about. I also draw Mr Nesbitt’s attention to something that appeared in the local press just this morning.

Mr Campbell: Not that photograph again.

Mr Morrow: No, it is not that photograph again. An article quoted two of Mr Nesbitt’s Colleagues, Mr Burnside and Mr Jeffrey Donaldson:

“We want to make it clear to the Government that the whole process is in danger of collapsing if there is going to be legislation for an amnesty for on-the-run prisoners or more policing reforms.”

I challenge Mr Nesbitt through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to tell the House whether he agrees with the sentiments expressed by his two Colleagues and is prepared to bring the charade to a halt, or whether he is going to give those guys over there, who have the cutting edge, an opportunity to continue to get —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Mr Attwood: There are contributions in every debate that define it as good or bad. On this occasion, it was defined as bad. Mr McCartney, you may like to wait 10 seconds.

Mr McCartney: No, I have had enough.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: Mitchel McLaughlin, in his contribution, mentioned the RUC, the RIR, the UDR, MI5 and so forth. He never once mentioned an IRA murder or atrocity. In contrast to that, in his contribution, the man who has just left the Chamber never mentioned one state murder or atrocity. That shows how this debate contrasts to the SDLP motion. I want to get back to that — *[Interruption]*.

Mr McLaughlin: I notice that Alban Maginness did not.

Mr Attwood: I will come back to you in a second and that will silence you.

The problem with the process — and it is a true process in part — is that it is occasional and partial. It is about the recovery of the bodies of the disappeared, a victims’ commission and inquiries into Bloody Sunday. It might also be about the appointment of an international judge to look at six cases. However, the problem with all of that is that the process is not fully inclusive. Some say that it creates a hierarchy of victimhood; others say that it is selective. It leaves few people reassured and many embittered. The SDLP amendment is trying to move the process beyond being particular, selective and exclusive to becoming inclusive and general, and common to all those who have suffered grief and pain over the past 30 years.

The principles that inform the SDLP amendment — and I welcome Monica McWilliams’s support — are the affirmation of those who have suffered, the acknowledgement of the wrong that has been done, and the move to greater accountability so that out of the pain of the past 30 years can come wisdom falling drop by drop upon the heart. That is the purpose of the SDLP amendment. If we do not move into that sort of territory we will create a hierarchy of victimhood in which many people will feel excluded — their grief will not be acknowledged.

This issue more than any other exposes the self-seeking agendas of Sinn Féin and the DUP, their double standards and their doublethink. While Sinn Féin calls for the state to account for its human rights abuses — a state that the IRA said it was at war with — they do not call for themselves in the IRA to account for the human rights abuses that they were guilty of. They call for an amnesty and for no accountability for what they did, but they do not apply the same standards and principles to what the state did. It is doublethink at a preposterous level.

3.45 pm

Sinn Féin says that it agrees in principle that those who were guilty of the Omagh bomb should be brought to justice, but it does not agree in principle that the IRA should be brought to justice for its actions. On the one hand, Sinn Féin calls for those who are exiled in Ireland because they are "on the run" to be allowed to come home. However, it refuses to accept its responsibility for allowing the return home of those exiled outside this island, whom they excluded without just cause. Sinn Féin says that it wants to persuade Unionists about the future of an agreed Ireland, yet prominent ex-Republican prisoners claim that the party should abandon the language of oppression, struggle and sacrifice, and call for the language of victory now.

On the one hand, it says that it wants to persuade Unionists that there is a bright future, yet on the other, one of its senior ex-Republican prisoners said at a recent conference that there could be no reconciliation in Northern Ireland until the British state acknowledged what it had done to the Irish people. This, more than any other issue, exposes Sinn Féin and the IRA.

Mr Ford: One of the most painful aspects of the Good Friday Agreement for many who eventually supported it was the early release of politically motivated prisoners. Many had to swallow hard before they backed that section of the agreement. However, the Good Friday Agreement provided that those who had been convicted in a court of law were eligible to be considered for release on licence. Their deeds were public. There was either a plea or a finding of guilt, and the release on licence meant that those concerned could be returned to prison. I suspect that if the Government proposal from the Weston Park communiqué had been contained in the agreement, not only might the majority have been smaller, but there might not have been a majority at all.

It is clear from the Government's proposals that to fail to pursue criminal prosecutions at this stage would be tantamount to accepting that a war was fought. It would be incredible if the Government were to proceed on that basis. Similarly, it would be dubious if they were to proceed with an amnesty without ensuring that the paramilitaries who would benefit from that amnesty had to lift their threats against others. That is why the motion was drafted carefully to set out in the limited detail that is possible at this stage a response of opposition to the Government's proposals. It states how those proposals could be refined realistically, in the light of the Government's commitment to Sinn Féin that they would proceed on that basis, and it inserts a direct linkage between those threatened by paramilitaries and the paramilitary organisations that would benefit from such an amnesty.

I will examine the three proposed amendments. I am concerned about the way in which Alban Maginness

proposed the section of his amendment that relates to the second sentence of the original motion. The issue of whether a truth commission would be appropriate for Northern Ireland is too complex to be dealt with in one sentence. That is why the Alliance Party, in its motion, proposed what it regarded as a minimum requirement. It did not venture to propose the establishment of a truth commission, a possibility that is opened up by the amendment that is proposed by Alban Maginness and Mr Attwood.

I acknowledge Alban Maginness's point that we should recognise the hurt of victims, but that is not the purpose of the motion. We have considered the needs of victims, and, when discussing that issue, we should remember that many will never know the details about those who carried out atrocities against them or their family members. Therefore, we cannot wrap up all victims' concerns into such a motion. Fundamentally, my difficulty with the SDLP's amendment is the weak, wobbly plea at the end that something should be done about exiles. It weakens the original motion far too drastically.

The DUP's amendment was outlined in the terms that we would have expected — nothing less from either the proposer or his Colleague. Mr Durkan responded to the suggestion that the parties that were present at Weston Park are bound by the communiqué of the two Governments to "take it or leave it". However, the point merits repetition.

Whatever Cedric Wilson and Ian Paisley Jnr may say about that, as Eileen Bell made clear, it is no part of our case that we supported the Weston Park communiqué. Some of us made our objections to that clear from an early stage.

The fundamental difficulty with the DUP amendment is that the Prime Minister has already offered some form of amnesty. The issue now is whether we can do something to ensure that that amnesty does not become an unreasonable, open-ended offer, but is dealt with in line with the terms of the agreement. It is not whether we should simply say no and know that the view of the Assembly if we do say no will simply be entirely overruled by the Government.

The Ulster Unionist amendment was an interesting effort. It seems to be some type of catch-up, chronologically as well as everything else, between the Alliance motion and the DUP amendment. There is an indication that that party has some sort of understanding. I welcome that Mr Trimble seems to think that praise was due to the Alliance motion, although I confess that I cannot say the same for Mr Nesbitt. I could not make out a word that he was saying that was of any relevance to either the motion or the UUP amendment — *[Interruption]*.

We must hope that he will improve in the future, and we will hear something relevant.

The UUP has dropped any issue of linkage. It has dropped any reference to the paramilitary exiles. Given that it has made an art form of creating linkages where they do not exist, for the UUP to drop a linkage where such a direct linkage clearly exists seems to be over the top, beyond anything that we would normally expect of that party. There is a direct comparability between the two issues. The linkage should stay. That is where the fundamental weakness in the UUP amendment must be addressed.

I want to mention some other comments in this brief winding-up speech for a long debate. I noticed that Mitchel McLaughlin believes that the motion takes a lopsided approach. Should he wish to bring forward a motion welcoming all those aspects of Weston Park that dealt with inquiries and so on, I have no doubt that he would be welcome to do so. Those points were dealt with by David Ervine and Mark Durkan. There is no doubt that Sinn Féin was the only party that had associates who were likely to benefit from the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has 10 seconds left.

Mr Ford: Therefore, it is not surprising that Sinn Féin is the only party that wanted to object to it.

None of the amendments adequately addresses the points properly raised, and therefore the motion should stand unamended.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 20; Noes 63

AYES

Alex Attwood, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alasdair McDonnell, Eugene McMennamin, Monica McWilliams, Jane Morrice, Eamonn O'Neill, Brid Rodgers, John Tierney.

NOES

Ian Adamson, Fraser Agnew, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Eileen Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Norman Boyd, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Seamus Close, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Bairbre de Brún, Nigel Dodds, David Ford, Sam Foster, Oliver Gibson, Tom Hamilton, William Hay, David Hilditch, Derek Hussey, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, John Kelly, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, Alex Maskey, Kieran McCarthy, Robert McCartney, David McClarty, William McCrea, Barry McElduff, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Pat McNamee, Francie Molloy, Maurice Morrow, Conor

Murphy, Mick Murphy, Dermot Nesbitt, Dara O'Hagan, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Sue Ramsey, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Patrick Roche, Jim Shannon, David Trimble, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson, Jim Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly negated.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that if amendment No 2, standing in the name of Mr Campbell, Mr Morrow and Mr Ian Paisley Jnr is made, amendment No 3 will fall.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 28; Noes 39

AYES

Fraser Agnew, Paul Berry, Norman Boyd, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Patrick Roche, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

NOES

Alex Attwood, Eileen Bell, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Seamus Close, Bairbre de Brún, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, David Ervine, Sean Farren, John Fee, David Ford, Tommy Gallagher, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, Billy Hutchinson, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Kieran McCarthy, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Eugene McMennamin, Pat McNamee, Monica McWilliams, Francie Molloy, Jane Morrice, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Brid Rodgers, John Tierney.

Question accordingly negated.

Question put, That amendment No 3 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 21; Noes 62

AYES

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Esmond Birnie, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, David Ervine, Sam Foster, Tom Hamilton, Derek Hussey, Billy Hutchinson, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, David McClarty, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Dermot Nesbitt, David Trimble, Jim Wilson.

NOES

Fraser Agnew, Alex Attwood, Eileen Bell, Paul Berry, Norman Boyd, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Gregory Campbell,

Mervyn Carrick, Seamus Close, Bairbre de Brún, Nigel Dodds, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, David Ford, Tommy Gallagher, Oliver Gibson, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, William Hay, Joe Hendron, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Kieran McCarthy, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Monica McWilliams, Francie Molloy, Maurice Morrow, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Sue Ramsey, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Patrick Roche, Brid Rodgers, Jim Shannon, John Tierney, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 21; Noes 63

AYES

Ian Adamson, Eileen Bell, Esmond Birnie, Seamus Close, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Reg Empey, David Ford, Sam Foster, Tom Hamilton, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, Kieran McCarthy, David McClarty, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Dermot Nesbitt, David Trimble, Jim Wilson.

NOES

Fraser Agnew, Alex Attwood, Paul Berry, Norman Boyd, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Bairbre de Brún, Nigel Dodds, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, David Ervine, Sean Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Oliver Gibson, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, William Hay, Joe Hendron, David Hilditch, Billy Hutchinson, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Monica McWilliams, Francie Molloy, Jane Morrice, Maurice Morrow, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Sue Ramsey, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Patrick Roche, Brid Rodgers, Jim Shannon, John Tierney, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Main Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. If the Members who are leaving will do so quietly, we can move on to the next item on the Order Paper.

SCHOOL BUSES

Mr Kennedy: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the number of children who have been killed getting on and alighting from school buses by motorists. It calls on the Executive to conduct urgently an investigation into measures to safeguard the welfare of our children when using school buses, taking into account the relevant laws introduced in the United States.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to bring this motion to the Assembly. It is an important issue. Given the number of accidents, at least two of which in the past three months have had tragic consequences, the debate is timely. The loss of a child, in any circumstances, is a tragic and traumatic event, and I want to be sensitive to the emotions and feelings of those who have lost children.

The safety of children while travelling on school buses, especially when boarding and alighting, has been a matter of concern to me, and I know that other Members share my concern. Several months ago, the Committee for the Environment published the findings of its inquiry into the transportation of children travelling to and from school. I acknowledge the Committee's work and commend it for the detailed consideration that it gave to such an important issue.

I recognise that the issues that my motion addresses are the responsibility of various Ministers, including the Minister of Education and the Minister for Regional Development. The Department of Education is responsible for policy on school transport, and the Minister for Regional Development would be responsible for changing the road traffic regulations to allow school buses to operate as they do in the American system.

I thank the Minister of the Environment for his presence today. I look forward to his response to the points that will be made in this important debate. As everyone is aware, this is Mr Foster's last appearance as Minister of the Environment. I pay tribute to him for the priority that he has given to road safety since he took office. Most importantly, as regards the motion, he moved rapidly to increase the number of road safety education officers. As Chairperson of the Education Committee, I am aware of the excellent work that road safety education officers do with young people in schools and other places. That was the clearest demonstration of the Minister's commitment to the safety of our children and young people, and I congratulate him warmly on it.

4.45 pm

The Minister was also responsible for a major increase in road safety advertising. The House will be aware of the high-impact campaigns, many of which addressed young people. Those campaigns have done much to change attitudes and behaviour and to raise

the profile of road safety. They have also addressed the principal causes of death and serious injury. The Minister's personal commitment to making our roads safer has been evident to all. I congratulate him on his performance as Minister of the Environment and for the courteous and accessible way in which he carried out his duties.

The motion urges the Executive to take the necessary action. This is a cross-cutting issue, the responsibility for which does not fall to only one Minister. In order to achieve satisfactory progress, the Executive will be required to take a co-ordinated and cohesive approach, involving not only the Department of the Environment, but the Department of Education and the Department for Regional Development.

Almost 300 schoolchildren were injured travelling to and from school last year. Of those, 76 were passengers on school buses and 100 were pedestrians. The category of pedestrians includes pupils who had just alighted from or were about to board buses. Everyone will agree that those figures must be reduced and that we must do our utmost to improve children's safety.

Research in the United States shows that three times as many deaths occur when pupils are boarding or alighting from school buses as occur when they are the occupants of buses. As a result, the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America states that children are at a greater risk of being killed when boarding or alighting from a school bus than at any other time. It also states that more school bus safety efforts should be directed towards improving the safety of children when boarding and alighting from buses.

In 1992, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), which is part of the US Department of Transportation, published guidelines on pupil transportation safety. Those guidelines established minimum recommendations for a state highway safety programme for pupil transportation, including the identification, operation and maintenance of school buses used for carrying students. It also made recommendations for the training of passengers, pedestrians and cyclists. The NHTSA recommends that each state in America should have a comprehensive pupil transportation safety programme and that a single agency for the administration and collation of safety data be established.

The guidelines also recommend that each state enact legislation to provide for uniform procedures regarding school buses stopping on public highways for the loading and unloading of children, and that public information campaigns should be conducted regularly to ensure that the driving public understands fully the implications of school bus warning signals and requirements to stop for school buses that are loading or unloading children. Standards have also been published that establish requirements for safety

devices to be installed on school buses to improve pedestrians' safety when they are close to the stopped school buses. The purpose of those standards is to minimise the likelihood of any vehicles passing a stopped bus and injuring nearby pedestrians.

In practical terms, the guidelines recommend that all school buses be clearly identifiable: they are usually painted a bright glossy yellow, which is the worldwide symbol of road safety. School bus drivers should receive training on unloading and unloading procedures, and education programmes have been created to teach children how to board and alight from school buses safely. In Kansas, those programmes are introduced at the start of each school year and repeated regularly throughout the year as a reminder.

School bus drivers should give a clear warning signal that they are about to stop the bus to allow children to alight or board by flashing amber lights that are clearly visible to other motorists. When the bus stops, red lights should flash and an extended arm safety device should be activated to indicate that the children must not cross immediately in front of the bus. The guidelines also recommend that when the school bus is stopped and the red lights are flashing, other motorists should be required to stop at a safe distance from the bus, regardless of the direction in which they are travelling.

Although the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has no authority to require states to adopt those guidelines, several states have enacted appropriate legislation. For example, in New York, not only must motorists not pass a stationary school bus, but when picking up or dropping off passengers who have to cross the public highway, the bus driver must instruct such passengers to cross in front of the bus while the driver keeps the bus halted with the red signals flashing until such passengers have reached the opposite side of the highway. Motorists are prohibited from overtaking a school bus when it is stopped and the penalty for doing so is a considerable fine, penalty points or a spell in jail. There are various methods by which that is enforced in other American states.

Members may also be aware of a project in Staffordshire in England where a local authority's yellow school bus fleet is claimed to be a resounding success in cutting congestion and taking children to school safely.

I have outlined measures being taken in the United States to improve school bus safety and, in particular, the efforts being made to improve the safety of school bus loading zones when children are boarding and alighting from buses. It is clear that school bus safety in the United States is regulated to a much greater extent than in Northern Ireland, and I understand that

other countries such as Australia and New Zealand are basing proposals on the American experience. In its report, the Committee for the Environment recommended that urgent research be undertaken into the potential for new legislation prohibiting other road traffic from passing school buses, and a 1999 report on school transport made similar recommendations in the Republic of Ireland.

Surely it is about time that we took action to address the matter seriously. We can learn from the American experience. We can put measures in place to make travelling by school bus safer. Therefore, I urge the Executive to introduce several pilot schemes in rural and urban areas to assess the impact that the prevention of overtaking school buses while children are boarding or alighting would have, and to see whether such legislation would be suitable for application here. I commend the motion to Members.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As expected, many Members have indicated that they wish to speak in the debate, and for that reason I must limit all those who wish to speak to five minutes. I must also advise that it may not be possible to call everyone who wishes to speak.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): Five minutes would not be enough time for me to go into the matters on which my Committee gave me authority to speak.

The opening speech referred to Members knowing that today would be the last appearance by the Minister of the Environment. Members do not know that. If an announcement has been made, it has not been conveyed to me as the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment or to the members of that Committee that there is a new Minister of the Environment. If that is the case, it would be more appropriate if the relevant Committee were told properly, or told in the House, rather than a Member making an announcement on behalf of some anonymous individual.

I must add that I support the motion with some hesitation. I wish to put on record that anything that contributes to children travelling more safely to and from school deserves the unequivocal and whole-hearted support of the Assembly. However, I must draw the attention of the House to matters relevant to the timing and content of the motion.

There is no need for the Executive to conduct an investigation, as suggested, into the welfare of children and school transport because the Committee for the Environment has already dealt with that matter comprehensively.

My Committee spent more than a year carrying out a thorough inquiry not just into the safety of children getting on and off school buses but into every aspect of school transport safety. The Committee considered

submissions from 57 groups and individuals. It took oral evidence from 13 different sources, including the leading Departments and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and it employed leading specialist transport consultants to assess critically and contribute to its findings. The report was published and was in Members' hands in September 2001.

Several of the Committee's 28 recommendations relate directly to the motion and are relevant to some of the points made by Mr Kennedy. Page 26 of the report deals in some length with the issue of children boarding and alighting from buses, and the Committee recommended, among many other matters,

"that the Department of the Environment should undertake urgent research into the potential for new legislation in respect of other road traffic passing vehicles that have school bus signs deployed".

The Committee made several recommendations, which were highlighted in its report. I do not have the time to go into those recommendations in this debate. I wrote to the Minister and his Department on several occasions regarding the report, but it was not until the eve of this debate that a contribution was received from the Department of the Environment. Up until then, the Committee received little or nothing of substance from the Department. Indeed, last Thursday, at the request of my Committee, senior officials from the Department of the Environment appeared before the Committee to bring Members up to date on the progress, or lack of progress, that had been made with regard to the report.

Unfortunately, it transpired that their brief was short, and it was indicated that it may be at least four months before the Department will get round to appointing an official to look at the report's key recommendations in any depth. Even then, it is intended to recruit outside consultants to advance the work.

5.00 pm

My Committee's despair and frustration will be appreciated. I inform the House of that, because as far back as October last year we requested that major revenue be made available to implement some of the recommendations. Up until now, we have not received a substantial response. However, we shall demand one. If it is Mr Foster's final appearance as Minister today, make no mistake about it — my Committee will be demanding that the new Minister take action on the issue, because we have not had action to date.

Time has run out, but there are many other things that I would like to have said on behalf of the Committee.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Ms Lewsley): I support the motion. I do not need to tell the House that the safety of our children is of paramount importance, and issues such as a safe means of transport to and from school

deserve priority. Safety when boarding or alighting from buses is not the only issue — on-board safety and the proximity of bus stops to children's homes are also important. We all want to keep our children safe, and we all have a responsibility to do what we can to prevent accidents and, as has been mentioned this afternoon, deaths.

Increased traffic is already a problem on our roads, and a drive is under way to encourage people to make more efficient use of public transport. To do so, parents must be assured that their children will be safe on the journeys to and from school and that there will be adequate supervision to prevent accidents when boarding or alighting from buses. Parents must also be assured that safety measures will be in place when their children are travelling on the buses. As a member of the Committee for Education we considered several measures, including the use of seatbelts; the abolition of the "3 for 2" seats; lights and signage on school buses; new legislation to either prohibit or severely reduce the speed of traffic overtaking school buses; the design of drop-off and pick-up points; supervision at road crossings; and the yellow bus system used in the United States. All those measures have the potential to reduce deaths or casualties, but each has a cost. All would help to protect the safety of children using transport to and from schools.

As has been mentioned by the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment — the Committee of which I have recently become a member — the school transport inquiry report showed that the cost of installing seat belts is estimated at £180 million, which includes £40 million in recurrent costs. Can we put a price on a child's life? In its presentation to the Committee last week, departmental representatives talked about the benefits of preventing road casualties. In economic costs, a death was equal to £1 million. A sum of £1 million would compensate no parent for the loss of a child.

Safety on school transport is a classic example of an opportunity for interdepartmental co-operation. It could involve the Department of Education, the Department for Regional Development and the Department of the Environment. However, that co-operation is not apparent because costs appear to be given a higher priority than children's lives.

Road safety education programmes are important to increase awareness of safety issues. It is vital that the safer routes to school initiative be expanded and delivered to all schools across Northern Ireland. We must ensure that our Administration delivers for young people. Its effects would be to encourage good practice, improve the co-ordination of transport services for children and emphasise the user of a public service rather than the provider.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I welcome the

presence of the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Education. The safety of children on school buses involves our road system and many Departments, including Education and Environment. The matter has been close to the hearts of the members of the Education Committee for some time. We asked for action on this issue. The House's attention has been drawn today to the Environment Committee's report, which was issued last year and on which no action has been taken. That must be changed.

I agree with Ms Lewsley that nothing is more important than the lives and welfare of our children. Action is vital. I am not sure that £140 million would be needed to install seat belts, but we should start that process. Seat belts are very expensive, but the lack of seat belts has not caused the deaths of children. Deaths occur mainly when children are boarding or alighting from buses, and mostly outside the bus, rather than when travelling on the bus. Seat belts would not be so very expensive.

Bus stops are a major danger zone. Passing vehicles kill or injure children leaving a bus stop or boarding a bus. The Department of the Environment alleviated that problem recently by providing space for buses at the sides of busy roads to allow traffic to continue while children board buses.

More work must be done to find out what system we should use. The Environment Committee has done much good work in gathering all the information; there is enough evidence available for action to be taken.

There is the possibility of a new collegiate system of schooling. That will require more transport for children. There are fewer children now, and that may necessitate the closure of some schools. That would oblige children to travel greater distances to the nearest school. The emissions from the additional buses will create an environmental problem.

Educating the public, children and bus drivers to the fact that children cannot tell the speed of oncoming traffic is important. Drivers seem to think that children know the speed that drivers are travelling at, and children seem to think that drivers see them, when it is obvious that they do not. Seeing a child at 20 metres can be the first sight that a driver has of a child leaving the front of a bus, and that can have serious consequences.

There is also the issue of the speed of drivers passing buses, and that is where the yellow bus scheme in America comes into its own. Anyone driving at more than 30 mph has a 90% chance of causing death. When speeds are reduced that percentage drops considerably. It has been shown that speed is an important factor. The American system is better than a system of flashing lights. A study in Tasmania has proved that flashing lights do not slow traffic — motorists will only slow down if they face penalties. Flashing

lights may help, but it is almost necessary to stop traffic passing a bus when children are alighting or boarding. It is as simple as that. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCarthy: I thank Mr Kennedy for moving this motion. I am also pleased that both Ministers are here.

I also share the concern expressed by Mr McCrea, the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, that his report has been gathering dust since September. Why has action not been taken? The report prepared by the Committee is detailed, informative and comprehensive in every way. I give full marks to the members of the Committee.

I am not so happy with the response from the Department of the Environment. Why has it taken so long to respond to the various concerns of the Committee? Surely a report provided by any Committee deserves to be taken seriously and acted on, especially when it involves such a serious matter as protecting the lives of our schoolchildren. I understand that Translink and the education boards have responded, but the Department of the Environment has not.

I made a written submission to the Committee, as did Ards Borough Council. We concentrated on four main themes, which were included in the Committee's report along with several others, and were among the many recommendations made to the Executive.

As the motion says, we need immediate measures to safeguard our children when using school buses. I have four main worries. First, I am concerned that the use of a double seat by three children is allowed. We must adopt a policy of one seat, one child. Secondly, on the question of seat belts, an inequality already exists in that private bus operators are, rightly, required by law to have seat belts on every seat, whereas public transport operators are not. That is grossly unfair, and I believe that there should be seatbelts for every seat on all our buses.

Thirdly, I support fully the policy of prohibiting standing on school buses. How can we ask for seat belts for all passengers and then allow standing? That is unacceptable. My fourth area of concern was highlighted by the presentation made to the Committee by the Women's Institute of Northern Ireland. Mrs Lyttle, from Portaferry in my constituency, who is chairperson of the international Women's Institute, made a good case for immediate safety improvements on the buses for all schoolchildren. Like myself, the Women's Institute was deeply touched by the death on the main road between Portaferry and Kircubbin in 1998 of a child who had just got off a school bus to visit his grandparents. Unfortunately, a passing car struck the youngster, who was fatally injured. In my opinion, another young life was lost unnecessarily.

There have been other incidents in which fatalities have occurred.

We must support the proposals of the Portaferry Women's Institute to achieve improvements in safety for youngsters getting on or alighting from a bus. Stopping the traffic has been suggested and was included as a recommendation in the Committee's report. I understand that in some countries, the traffic is stopped in both directions. That must be looked at immediately.

The 28 recommendations contained in the report of the Committee for the Environment must be taken seriously and acted on as soon as possible. Otherwise, we will continue to have tragic accidents like the one that occurred outside Kircubbin in my constituency a few years ago. Surely every Member in the Assembly wants to avoid such a repetition. I support the motion, and I hope that the full report will be brought to the Assembly in due course and the 28 recommendations acted on immediately.

Ms Morrice: I acknowledge the work of the Minister and, on his departure, I congratulate him on the work that he has done and on his commitment to road safety. I know that he made changes for the better. I will always say that it will never be enough — but I would say that. I urge the Member who takes the Minister's place to make the issue of road safety a top priority. The permanent secretary promised the Public Accounts Committee that that would be done.

I urge the new Minister to treat road safety as the top priority issue. I do not want to go on at length because everything necessary has been said about buses, road safety and the potential for following the example of the United States. There are interesting examples in the different states.

5.15 pm

I welcome and support the motion wholeheartedly. We have learnt from the Chairperson of the Committee about the relevant report, of which I am aware. I would not knock the fact that the motion has been tabled, as Members are all in this together. If a Member decides to table a motion to do something about a report that is sitting on a shelf, that is all the better, given that it is for the safety of children. It does not matter, therefore, who says it or when it is said, as long as it has the goal of saving lives. Every effort must be made to make buses, roads, and public transport in general, safer for our children.

I want to touch on the issue of ministerial and departmental responsibility for road safety. My Colleague, Ms McWilliams, recently took a delegation from the Saintfield Road to meet the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Peter Robinson, to bring to his attention the dangers for children on that road. She had a constructive meeting, and she is hopeful that a

pelican crossing will be put in place. I am using that as an example, because the problem is in knowing which Minister and which Department to go to.

Mr Kennedy, in his opening remarks, asked who covered the issue. In this case, the Department of Education, the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development all have a role. It is too fragmented with regard to which Department has responsibility for ensuring action. That is an inappropriate way to deal with such an important issue. I urge the Executive to give the matter serious consideration and to bring road safety under one roof.

I want to conclude by quoting a figure that I have stated on many occasions, because I am an advocate of road safety. It is a figure that is still startling even when it is repeated — 150 road deaths per year in Northern Ireland, which is higher than the United Kingdom average, and 12,000 casualties per year. Patricia Lewsley has spoken about the human cost and that goes without saying, but 12,000 road casualties a year costs the economy £450 million a year. That shocks me every time I say it. When we seriously start to prioritise road safety we will not only save lives, we will save money. However, lives are much more important. I support the motion and hope that something is done promptly.

Mr Gallagher: Every day over 100,000 children use transport in different parts of the North. It is a useful facility for both parents and children. It is helpful towards children's learning, and it widens opportunities and choice for parents. Unfortunately, as the motion states, there are accompanying dangers. Sadly, from time to time they involve the loss of young lives.

Already this winter two children have lost their lives when, according to the reports, alighting from school transport vehicles.

Two aspects of school transport vehicles have been mentioned by other Members: the provision of seatbelts and regulations such as the "3 for 2" seating rule. Both these received attention in the Committee for the Environment's report, and I hope that work will continue.

We have to understand that the facts show that most fatalities around school transport occur when children are alighting from school buses, so areas where children are either boarding or alighting from school buses need particular attention. School buses include those provided by the boards, those provided by Translink and the privately owned buses that do school transport runs on contract from the education and library boards.

How recognisable are school transport vehicles, especially when children are boarding or alighting? I support strongly the idea of having better warning lights fitted on all school buses to improve the visibility of the vehicles and to draw the attention of passing

motorists to the fact that children are boarding or alighting and are somewhere around the bus. In my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone there was a fatality a couple of weeks before Christmas. A 14-year-old child had got off a bus, and it had moved on, but as she crossed the road to get to her home, an oncoming car hit the child. From the reports I understand that there was no fault with the school bus driver, with the operation of the bus or with the driver of the oncoming vehicle, who was unfortunately caught up in the accident. That is why we must think about how we warn passing motorists of the dangers to children around that time.

I also support a cross-departmental approach involving the Department for Regional Development, and, again, I call for the gritting of all school bus routes in winter. That would make an important contribution, as would the provision of parking areas where buses could pull in off a main road to allow children to get on and off. Although children get road safety education in schools, this is so important that the Department of Education should make sure that in the interest of their safety, children get specific education about personal safety and school transport.

Mrs I Robinson: One issue is sure to provoke the same degree of concern and frustration at the same time of the year, each year, and that is the overcrowding of school buses and the safety of pupils travelling by bus. Problems have risen at the start of every term over the past few years and continue to affect many school routes across the Province. Every September for the past five years we have had horror stories of over 100 children being squeezed onto school buses every morning and of pupils being bypassed because buses are overcrowded. Although there has not been a serious accident yet because of this, the potential for injury to passengers remains at an unwarranted high.

Unfortunately, the lives of many children have been claimed, and many serious injuries have been sustained as pupils have alighted from school buses. In almost every instance it has been impossible for the driver of the overtaking vehicle to take evasive action when pupils step out into their path.

One area of local life which the Assembly has the power to address and improve is the overcrowding of school buses. The reason for that is twofold. The main one is that legislation currently classifies 13-year-olds as children and allocates three such children to a double seat on school buses, but children of that age are just too big for that. To compound the problem, pupils have school bags, kitbags, hockey sticks and art folders with them, which often have to be set on the floor because of insufficient storage space, making it difficult for standing passengers. A change in the legislation is, therefore, essential to deal with the problem, as more buses are needed to carry children to and from school.

Therein lies the second problem: Translink will only provide the transport that the local education board pays for. In the past four years, lobbying has failed to make any progress on that matter, with the education boards claiming that no problem exists. It is inevitable that more transport will have to be provided, as it is only a matter of time before there is a serious accident. Translink representatives, although co-operative, say that they are only fulfilling their legislative obligations and that, as things stand, they cannot provide further transport or safety measures.

There is no excuse for packing buses full of schoolchildren and no reason for legislation's not addressing children's safety when alighting from school buses. I am gravely concerned about the safety of children using the school bus service, including those attending Glastray College, Comber High School and Regent House in my constituency. Their safety does not get sufficient priority and, again, it is only a matter of time before serious injuries are sustained.

I welcome the publication last September of the Committee for the Environment's report into school transport. I am glad that the public inquiry found in favour of many of the proposals requested by interested groups and organisations. Most encouraging was the recommendation that serious consideration be given to the use of hazard lights on school buses. There is an argument that cars and other vehicles should be prevented from overtaking school buses that slow down and stop to allow children to alight, and that also display the new signage.

Another encouraging factor was the proposal to abolish the "3 for 2" seating arrangement, which stipulates that three young people should share a seat constructed for two adults. Children today are taller and bigger than children used to be, and they carry more equipment and coursework with them to school. It is too much to squeeze three children onto one double seat. I am glad that the Committee has called for the implementation of the one-seat-for-one-pupil policy and that legislation that permits children to stand on school buses is being phased out. All pupils should be entitled to a seat.

Other recommendations such as those that call for improved liaison between schools and service providers, misbehaviour and vandalism to be addressed, a reduction in the baggage carried by children on buses and the development of a new and enhanced road safety education programme are to be welcomed.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Everyone agrees that protecting schoolchildren as they travel to and from school on buses is hugely important. Sábháilteacht ár bpáistí agus iad ag taisteal ar scoil ag iad ag taisteal abhaile.

There is merit in the argument that the Executive should have taken action on this before now, and the recommendations of the Committee for the Environment should have been acted upon decisively. It is to be hoped that a more joined-up approach will be taken in future.

I welcome the presence of Mr Foster and Mr McGuinness. When matters within the remit of the Department for Regional Development arise, Mr P Robinson should be here also.

I support many of the recommendations contained in the Environment Committee's report. It is legal for dozens of schoolchildren to stand in school buses, which not only puts them in danger but obscures the driver's view when he checks his mirror. The provision of seat belts and illuminated school bus signs is important. The American model of good practice has been examined, and another model of good practice exists in Germany, where the emphasis is placed on information for car drivers, with motorists educated about the likely patterns of behaviour of schoolchildren in traffic.

5.30 pm

Iris Robinson made a good point about the problem being worsened by the heavy school bags that children must carry. In India there are restrictions on the number and weight of bags that children should be expected to carry. If those limits are exceeded, the school is fined. The web site of the North Western Health Board in Donegal contains advice on school bag safety.

We are united in our hope, expectations and prayers for the safe journeys of schoolchildren. When they leave home in the morning, the last thing that anyone wants or expects is an accident. The subject is made pertinent by the recent death of Julie Meldrum in Fermanagh, which other Members mentioned.

I am aware of the time restrictions, but I will refer to the Department for Regional Development's safer routes to school initiative. I welcome the western division of the Road Service's provision of two lay-bys and attendant footways at Slevin's Crossroads at Tattyreagh near Omagh. Those works are being completed on the main Omagh to Fintona road as a result of lobbying and a site meeting, which my Colleagues and I initiated about two years ago as part of the safer routes to school initiative. A near-fatal accident occurred there just over 10 years ago.

The development of the safer routes to school initiative by the Department for Regional Development is important, but the approach to the issue must be joined up. The statutory walking distance of two miles for primary schoolchildren and three miles for post-primary schoolchildren must be relaxed, and that is a particular problem in isolated rural areas. Last week, I lobbied for the provision of safe transport home for a

post-primary school pupil who is dropped off in a forested rural area 2·8 miles from her home. She is expected to walk home between 4.00 pm and 5.00 pm in winter through a forested region. All those initiatives are important, as is a joined-up approach. Rumble strips should be added to roads. Flashing lights should be added to buses, and they could also be erected outside schools and timed to warn motorists when children are arriving at, or leaving, school.

I commend the motion and any action that concentrates the mind of the Ministers responsible for the matter. I wish Mr Foster all the best and congratulate him on the good work that he has done as Minister.

Mr A Doherty: As a dedicated and slowly maturing Back-Bencher, I associate myself with Members' tributes to Minister Sam Foster. He is a man of great experience, integrity and wisdom, and I know that he will continue to give excellent service, perhaps in a more relaxed fashion, to the Assembly and to his constituents.

I commend the Member for his motion. It takes account of the strong feelings expressed throughout the community that the safety of children travelling to and from school is a matter of the greatest importance.

It is also a confirmation of the importance of the exhaustive process of consultation on the subject by the Committee for the Environment. That resulted in the publication of the 'Report on the Inquiry into Transport Used for Children Travelling to and from School', which contains many recommendations aimed at maintaining a safer environment for our children.

I may be going over ground covered by the Chairperson. However, perhaps it is a good thing that, on this issue at least, we are singing from the same hymn sheet. The Committee's report has been doing the rounds in the relevant Departments for some time. The Department for Regional Development, the Department of Education, and the Department for Employment and Learning have responded appropriately. Unfortunately the lead Department, the Department of the Environment, has not been so forthcoming. This is surprising, given the Minister's undoubted and very strong commitment to road safety. However, feet are being dragged, perhaps because of the cost or the complexities of such long standing and neglect. A start must be made — and the sooner the better — before the tragedy that is "waiting to happen", happens.

I must refer to one departmental reaction to the last part of recommendation 1 in the report — the need to carry out a regulatory impact assessment

"to evaluate the potential costs and likely benefits of making changes".

That is a proper and inevitable step. It seems to me that the Department is reluctant to set things in motion because of the waves that might be created, either

because certain recommendations would be considered essential but prohibitively expensive, or because the benefits would be too little to justify the expense.

With regard to the specifics of the motion, I suggest that the Executive have ready access to a great deal of the information that an investigation might discover. Much of what is needed is to be found in the Committee's report — for example, in recommendations 8 and 9, which deal with effective school bus signs and warning lights. Recommendation 12 considers the possible benefits of a dedicated school bus system, like the American yellow buses. Recommendation 14 deals specifically with action to reduce the risks of boarding and alighting from school buses. No doubt there are additional or alternative actions that could be taken. However, those measures would be a good, affordable start.

Drivers have an awesome responsibility. They must appreciate, or be taught, the importance of self-restraint and patience. A car in motion is a terrifying weapon when it comes into contact with fragile flesh. Motorists must be made aware of the power that they have to kill, maim and cause distress and anguish to their neighbours. They must learn self-restraint and consideration in every situation, all the time. If they do that, everything else will be easy.

Mr Shannon: I am surprised to see the motion being tabled, bearing in mind that the Committee for the Environment has supported some new measures yet, as other Members have said, its report has been sitting on the shelf gathering dust for a long time. The Committee saw the need to put preventative measures in place. However, no action has been taken to respond to that.

I support the motion because it deals with children's safety, something that many Members have been involved with since their earliest days in politics. The issue is of particular importance and interest to me because at least two children in my constituency have been killed in the past few years while alighting from buses on their way to and from school. It is an issue that school boards of governors, of which many of us are members, are also concerned about. As the father of three young children, I am conscious of the need for child safety.

However, children are a law unto themselves, especially when they are not supervised or are in a crowd. When they mess about and try to impress among a crowd of their peers, they forget about the dangers that their parents constantly warn them about. Children do not always pay attention when they are fooling around. Unfortunately, when this behaviour is teamed with a bus and a busy road it can become a fatal combination. The bus driver is responsible for the children's safety until they descend from the bus. However, there has never been an extra adult present to supervise the children as

they get on and off the bus. Bearing in mind the exuberance of children, that seems to be the one truly preventative action that would help them be more obedient and well behaved when travelling to and from school.

I have no illusions that school buses are as chaotic and full of mischief as they were when most of us travelled on them. The driver of the bus has his or her work cut out just driving the bus, let alone trying to control the children or to see where they get to once they get off the bus. One way to remedy that is for another responsible adult to be on the bus to keep the peace and, more importantly, to supervise the children as they get on and, especially, off the bus. The obvious rebuttal to that is that it will cost money. With the education budget under strain, many will say that it cannot be done. However, what price is a child's life?

Mr Kennedy mentioned the relevant American laws regarding school buses. I am in favour of many of those because in America buses deliver 75% to 80% of children to either school or home. The Department could look to the Community Transport Association to ascertain the initial cost of setting up such an operation. Something must be done to protect our children from accidents caused by misadventure.

School buses in America are fitted with four sets of lights. Strobe lights make drivers aware of the presence of a school bus, even in poor visibility. Buses also have loud horns, similar to those found on lorries and large vehicles, that sound when reversing. All those adjustments have been made purely to save lives, and have been effective. Something similar must be put in place in Northern Ireland.

One of the most innovative American laws is that traffic on both sides of the road must stop when a school bus is pulling in to let children on or off. That law alone would prevent children from being knocked down, and thus injured or killed, because all traffic on the street would come to a complete standstill.

The law lets a child enjoy his or her trip to and from school, but it does not prevent the odd lapse in concentration that has been fatal in the past. The problem with the law is that it works if there is a system of special school buses. In Northern Ireland, school buses are not specially identified. They must be altered to distinguish them from other buses.

The sentiment of the law is ideal, but its implementation will require not only buses being identified as such, but police officers keeping those who flout the law from harming children. However, the police do not have sufficient numbers to patrol the streets of Northern Ireland let alone enforce new laws that will benefit our children and keep them safe. More police officers should be available in the Province to educate schoolchildren in road safety. The Belfast Agreement has reduced the number of police officers, and there

are very few left to give our children those life-saving talks.

Something is needed to keep our children safe. We must talk to American schools and learn how their children have benefited from the new measures that were put in place to protect them from being killed when going to and from school by bus. We must investigate what has been done in Australia, France and other European countries. We must investigate the best way to safeguard our children because, as we all agreed, something must be done. We cannot afford to have another child injured or killed.

Mr S Wilson: First, I will make two observations. The House will note the irony that it took a member of the Ulster Unionist Party to drag the Minister here to talk about some of the issues that the Environment Committee had been trying to get him to talk about for, apparently, four or five months.

Secondly, it is nice to hear that members of Sinn Féin, according to Gerry McHugh, now believe that there is nothing more important than the lives of children. I am sure that many families have wished over the past 30 years that that lesson had been learnt a long time ago.

I want to ask a couple of questions about some of the issues that have been raised. We must put the issue of school transport in context. Mr Gallagher said that, every day, there are over 110,000 journeys to and from school. Over a school year, that works out as 36 million journeys. Danny Kennedy said that there are 300 accidents per year. That puts the degree of safety with which children are delivered to school in context. All those who are involved should be congratulated.

5.45 pm

Several issues have been raised today. Some of them require minor changes to be made to bus stops; others require extensive expenditure. For example, several Members referred to the seat belt issue. To fit seat belts in all buses would require the purchase of many extra buses. The capital costs of that would be about £125 million, and the additional running costs, which would be paid to the education and library boards, would be another £40 million. Put in context with the £46 million that is currently spent on school transport, it amounts to an increase of 100% each year. Although I agree that we must ensure that youngsters are delivered to school safely, it would have been useful if Members who spoke about that measure had suggested what proportion of the Budget they would use to facilitate it.

We must bear in mind that to put seat belts in buses does not guarantee that youngsters will use them. Should extra staff be employed? Should teachers travel on buses to ensure that seat belts are worn? Some of the

proposals that have been suggested raise as many questions as they provide solutions.

It has been mentioned that when a bus stops to allow children to alight, traffic coming from the rear and the front should be stopped. We do not have dedicated school buses. It is often impossible to tell whether a bus is carrying ordinary passengers or youngsters. The buses could be fitted with lights. However, given the location of many bus stops, does that mean that drivers, who may be travelling at 30mph or 40mph should realise that there is a school bus ahead, and stop and wait until it moves off? Some investigation must be done into the road safety issue of cars suddenly stopping in the middle of a road. That is what often leads to accidents in which cars ram into other cars.

Another suggestion was that people could be employed to supervise at bus stops. That is an admirable idea, but have the resource implications been considered? To introduce a no-standing policy on school buses would cost £22 million to provide the necessary additional buses.

I would have liked to have heard some ways in which those issues could be resolved. Perhaps there will be some answers in the winding-up speeches.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): I thank the mover of the motion. It is interesting to hear what has been said on those important issues. This appears to be my swansong as a Minister. I am disappointed by the absence of a piper to play 'Farewell to the Creeks' as I leave.

Mr S Wilson: We could arrange that.

Mr Foster: Could you, Mr Wilson? Thank you very much indeed.

I have been honoured and privileged to serve the Assembly. I thank all concerned for their help, co-operation, kindness and courtesy during my time as Minister. I wish my successor every success in his new role.

I have always been a believer in the old maxim, "moderation in all things". Even in our belief that our individual wisdom is the way in which the world should perform, it is sometimes lax in the reactions of those whose task it is in life to offer instant opinions on all things great and small. No section of the community has all the virtues or all the vices. Most people try to do their jobs as best they can, even if they are not always successful. He who has never failed to reach perfection has the right to be the harshest critic. However, criticism is good for people in public institutions. In a democracy, no institution can expect to be free from that.

No one has a monopoly on care and wisdom. I am a father, a grandfather and a former professional childcare worker. I am aware of the need for love, care and

protection of the person and property, and so too are the staff in the Department of the Environment. The Department's staff have a role to perform, and they are aware of that when they appear before Committees. It would be helpful if Committee members spoke with departmental staff rather than at them when they appear before Committees to answer questions.

I listened with great interest to Members' contributions. All right-minded people share their desire to reduce the number of deaths and serious injuries on our roads. I have devoted much of my efforts as a Minister to pursuing this objective and have made road safety my top priority. I am spurred on by the knowledge that nearly all deaths and injuries on the roads are avoidable. Most are the result of human error, such as carelessness, inattention, excessive speed, alcohol consumption, by pedestrians and drivers, and the failure to wear seat belts.

The avoidable death or injury of a child is particularly tragic. I speak for all Ministers, especially the three Ministers with responsibility for road safety and school transport, when I say that we will continue to do what we can to improve our Departments' response.

The Assembly will appreciate that my departmental responsibilities are confined to overall co-ordination of the road safety strategy, road safety education and publicity, and vehicle and driving standards. The Department of Education is responsible for policy on school transport provision, and the Department for Regional Development is responsible for road traffic regulations governing the operation of school buses and other traffic. In the context of that division of responsibility, I will read extracts from the responses of the Department of Education and the Department for Regional Development to the Committee for the Environment's school transport report as set out in the composite response that I sent to the Chairperson of the Committee yesterday. It is a response to the recommendation for the provision of a dedicated and segregated school bus system, similar to the yellow bus system in the United States

"In DE's view this is, in effect, a recommendation that pupils should be transported on a contracted and/or ELB service which should also be available to non-entitled pupils. There would have to be a two tier system with paying and non-paying passengers. There would also be implications for the public transport system as many of the Translink bus routes serve both the public and pupils and it would go against the concept of an integrated transport strategy.

"The Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions in Great Britain recently announced a number of pilot schemes to test the effectiveness of these yellow buses. Pilot trials have been delayed while the manufacturers revise the design to accommodate European requirements. It is hoped that the trial will now proceed in the early part of 2002. While the Department will discuss with DRD the merits of undertaking pilot schemes here, it would seem more appropriate in the DE's view to await the outcome of the trials in England before pursuing this recommendation."

The Department for Regional Development's response was as follows:

"DRD is concerned that the establishment of a segregated school bus system would have a serious adverse impact on the viability of considerable parts of the stage carriage network, particularly in rural areas. It is likely that the loss of patronage from school children would reduce fare income on many services to such an extent that Translink would have no option but to withdraw such services. This would be a serious blow to DRD's objective of promoting the use of public transport. Because of this and also due to lack of resources, DRD is not prepared to pilot the use of Yellow Buses."

As regards the proposal for several pilot schemes to assess the impact of preventing vehicles from overtaking school buses when children are boarding and alighting, Mr Kennedy has already acknowledged that the Environment Committee's school transport report recommended that research be carried out.

In response to the Committee, the Department for Regional Development stated:

"Research into the potential for new legislation in this area is the responsibility of DRD Roads Service transportation unit to investigate. DRD will examine the issue, discuss with the DTLR and report back to the Committee on its findings."

I now turn to the issue of child road safety. First, I thank the Member for his kind remarks when opening the debate. I have sought to do what I can within the programmes for which I have responsibility, and I appreciate the sentiments that have been expressed by many Members about my efforts on road safety issues.

Although Northern Ireland does not have the type of dedicated and segregated school bus system that is used in the USA, it is nevertheless reassuring that the safety record of buses and coaches in Northern Ireland is good. In the four years from April 1997 to March 2001, 131 children, aged between four and 15, were killed or seriously injured on Northern Ireland's roads while travelling to or from school. Six of the children killed and 93 of those seriously injured were pedestrians. One of those killed and 18 of those seriously injured were car passengers. Six of the children seriously injured, but none of those killed, were bus, coach or minibus passengers. Buses are, therefore, a relatively safe form of transport for children, compared to travelling on foot or by car, and that is further supported by the fact that more children travel to school by bus than by car.

However, I must emphasise that although the number of children killed or seriously injured as pedestrians in the vicinity of buses is not separately identified in police statistics, road safety practitioners, schools educational authorities, parents, police and all involved in road safety widely recognise such areas as being danger zones. Child behaviour in and around bus stops when going to and coming from school is widely accepted as requiring attention from all road safety authorities.

A key area in addressing that problem is road safety education in schools, and I will outline what my Department currently does in that field and our plans for new initiatives. The Assembly is already aware of the additional resources that I was able to secure in the 2001-02 Budget to increase the number of road safety education officers from 11 to 21 from last May. Those officers provide valuable support for schools through the annual provision of over £650,000 worth of road safety teaching materials suitable for different age groups. Among those materials is the road safety teaching aid calendar that is provided to every nursery and primary school classroom in Northern Ireland. The calendars are used as a classroom teaching aid throughout the school year, and they feature guidance on behaviour when travelling to school by bus and advice on how to cross the road after getting off the bus.

The increase in the number of road safety education officers will allow the introduction, from October, of practical child pedestrian training in support of classroom training at various primary schools, mainly in areas of social deprivation. Research indicates that children from deprived areas are more likely to be involved in a traffic collision than other children.

Although the work of the road safety education officers is being targeted particularly at schools in those areas, my Department has an overall objective of ensuring that every school in Northern Ireland is visited at least twice a year. In 2002-03 it is expected that officers will make over 4,000 school visits.

Other work by road safety education officers that is relevant to child road safety includes: cycling proficiency programmes in schools, which train 10,000 children each year; working with post-primary schools to deliver courses on road traffic studies — approximately 160 post-primary schools offer formal traffic studies as a timetable subject, with 71 schools offering the courses as a GCSE subject known as motor vehicle and road user studies; organising visits by theatre groups to schools as part of a road safety education programme; and working with older pupils to encourage more responsible attitudes to their behaviour as road users as they reach driving age.

My Department's publicity campaigns, targeting the major causes of road casualties — excessive speed, alcohol consumption by both drivers and pedestrians, and failure to wear seat belts, are also relevant to child road safety, including the home-to-school journey.

Included in my Department's initial response to the Committee for the Environment's report on school transport is a commitment to consider further how to increase children's awareness of the dangers that they face when travelling to and from schools — as pedestrians and when boarding, or alighting from, school buses. Equally importantly, my officials are also considering

ways of increasing drivers' awareness of the danger that they pose to child pedestrians, especially in the vicinity of school buses.

6.00 pm

In developing these proposals, we will be working closely with the Department for Regional Development in the context of its safer routes to school policy, and with the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

My Department is also working with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on a major new proposal, using part of my allocations for 2002-03 and 2003-04 from the Executive's new directions fund. For the first time in Northern Ireland this will involve the introduction of a children's traffic club. Similar clubs have been very successful in Great Britain.

The children's traffic club provides the parents of every three-year-old with six free road safety books, at three-monthly intervals, as part of a structured and tailored introduction to road safety for parents and young children. All this documentation will integrate with information they will receive later at playgroup and primary school.

It is my objective that, through these interventions, children and other vulnerable road users will be made more alert to the dangers they face on the road, and that drivers and riders will associate buses with a critical danger area for children and adjust their driving accordingly.

I now turn to the Environment Committee's inquiry into school transport. I read some of the coverage of what was said to my officials when they gave a presentation to the Committee last week, and I am glad to have this opportunity, on the Floor of the Assembly, to refute some of that criticism. It is true that the Committee has only now received a formal response from my Department. This was due in part to a desire to be helpful to the Committee by producing a composite response. We wanted to collate the views of all those interested in the report, including the Department of Education and the education and library boards, as well as the Department for Regional Development and Translink, rather than send a piecemeal response. Clearly I now have to wonder if that effort was misplaced.

Moreover, it would not be true to suggest that there has been no dialogue with the Committee since the report's publication in September 2001. The report's four key recommendations on "3 for 2" seating, standing, seat belts, and signage and new lights have significant public expenditure implications, which have been mentioned. Expenditure could amount to over £180 million in capital costs, and over £60 million per year thereafter in recurrent costs.

I wrote to Dr McCrea in October 2001 to remind him of these implications and the potential impact on the nature of public transport provision. I wrote to Dr

McCrea again in December 2001, seeking the Committee's view on the extent to which there was objective evidence from its investigations that road safety benefits commensurate with those additional costs are likely to be available. There has been nothing but silence since. I also asked from which Executive budgets the millions of pounds needed to implement the Committee's recommendations might be taken — perhaps health, housing, or education? Nothing but silence again.

This brings me to a serious point about the nature of public office. It is clear that many who spent the years of direct rule championing every populist cause that came along have found it difficult to adjust to the realities and responsibilities of devolution. Emotive slogans about the value of a child's life, or about disasters waiting to happen, are not a basis for good policy or responsible decision-making. We all, Executive Ministers no less than others, treat child road safety with the utmost seriousness. To suggest otherwise is deeply offensive. While I know that one cannot put a price on the life of a child, and I speak as a parent and grandparent, as a Minister who has to operate as part of an Executive with a finite budget —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, I must advise you that you have less than a minute left.

Mr Foster: Can you give me some allowance with this being my last speech of the evening? A couple of minutes will be enough for me to finish.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There were problems on the last occasion that I showed some latitude in the House. I cannot set a precedent.

Mr Foster: You have lost your compassion, Mr Deputy Speaker.

This is the last time I shall address the Assembly as Minister of the Environment, and it is fitting that the topic on this occasion has been road safety. During my time in office I have made this my top priority. I have been saddened by every death and serious injury that has occurred. I have worked to obtain additional resources in this vital area and to support the work of other Departments and the police in their road safety efforts. I hope that the additional effort we have been able to put in on education, public awareness, and generally raising the public profile of road safety, will result in long-term dividends in reducing the death and injury on our roads.

I end by thanking all in the Executive and in the Chamber who have supported me in these efforts — even those who have sought to spur me on with barbed remarks. I wish my successor well in the task that lies ahead — not just on road safety but on the whole challenge of the Department of the Environment portfolio. I look forward to supporting him from the Back Benches.

Mr Kennedy: We have had a useful exchange of views, and I place on record my thanks to all the Members who have contributed. I thank the Minister of the Environment for his presence, and I also acknowledge the presence of the Minister of Education.

What we have heard will, and can, be the basis for early progress on this important matter. I hope that will be so. It was my objective in bringing the motion to the House. Many Members made important points in their contributions. Dr McCrea, as Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, said that his Committee's report had made several key recommendations and that it can be the basis from which to move forward. It would have been helpful if he had presented his report on behalf of his Committee to the Assembly earlier for wider debate. That possibility remains, and I hope that he will consider that to be appropriate.

I was grateful to Patricia Lewsley, who referred to the loss of a child and to the fact that that cannot and ought not to be calculated in monetary terms. Likewise, we must acknowledge that there are measures that cost comparatively little which could be implemented at an early stage. Indeed, Mr McHugh referred to lights that can be attached to school buses and vehicles.

I was heartened by the support from Mr McCarthy and the Portaferry Women's Institute, of which presumably he is not a member, though it is obvious that he takes on board their sensible views on this. Jane Morrice made the important point that saving lives is what we should be about. She also pointed out the cross-cutting nature of this and how it affects the work of the Department of the Environment, The Department of Education and The Department for Regional Development. Mr Gallagher rightly said that it is most dangerous when pupils are alighting from school buses, and statistics and research in America bear that out. Iris Robinson highlighted the overcrowding of school buses, and as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education and a local representative I am very aware of that. Constituency representatives are concerned about how best to address that problem urgently and effectively.

Mr McElduff welcomed the consensus on the safety of schoolchildren and referred to other models of good

practice in places such as Germany. It might be important to engage in research to see if we can make and improve sensible recommendations. Arthur Doherty, with his customary modesty, misplaced I must say, welcomed the motion. He was very much singing from the same hymn sheet as Dr McCrea, and that was an interesting duet. Mr Shannon rightly paid tribute to the school bus drivers. It was never my intention to criticise school bus drivers. We all know the contribution that they make to the safe passage of children.

Mr S Wilson, with his customary and legendary style, rather overestimated even my ability to drag a ministerial Colleague, or a party Colleague, to the Assembly to chastise him in some way. However, he helped tease out many important issues in this debate — the cost issues and some of the practical outworking. That was an important contribution. We will be wise to look carefully at all the proposals. By all means, we should study the other models of good practice, whether in America or in other parts of Europe, but we would be wise to look closely at the practical outworking of that.

The Minister gave us a detailed response. I thank him for that and for his commitment shown and proved to road safety issues during his stewardship of his Department. He will have a continuing interest in that.

I am heartened by the collective view of Assembly Members that, between the Executive Departments that have some responsibility in this, progress can be made, proposals can be formed and legislation can be brought forward soon to improve and further enhance the safety of the children who attend our schools. I am grateful to all those who participated and thank them for their excellent contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the number of children who have been killed getting on and alighting from school buses by motorists. It calls on the Executive to conduct urgently an investigation into measures to safeguard the welfare of our children when using school buses, taking into account the relevant laws introduced in the United States.

Adjourned at 6.12 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 25 February 2002

*The Assembly met at noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).
Members observed two minutes' silence.*

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS:

Election of Deputy Speaker

Mr Speaker: I wish to remind Members that the election of a Deputy Speaker will be conducted in accordance with Standing Orders 4 and 5. I will begin by asking for nominations. Any Member may rise to propose that another Member be elected a Deputy Speaker. Each nomination must be seconded, and I will verify that the Member nominated is willing to accept the nomination. I shall then ask for further proposals and deal with any subsequent proposals in the same way. When it appears that there are no more proposals, I will make it clear that the time for proposals has passed. If Members wish, a brief debate may follow.

At the conclusion of the debate, or, if there is no debate, at the conclusion of the nominations, I will put the Question that the Member first proposed be a Deputy Speaker of this Assembly, a motion that will have to be carried on a cross-community basis. If the motion is not carried I will put the Question in relation to the next nominee and so on until all nominations are exhausted. Once a Deputy Speaker is elected, all other nominations fall.

Do we have any proposals?

Mr Trimble: I have great honour in proposing that Sir John Gorman, who has resigned as a Deputy Speaker, be succeeded by Mr Jim Wilson.

Mr Davis: I second the nomination of Mr Wilson.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I propose Mr Mervyn Carrick.

Mr Morrow: I second that nomination.

Mr Speaker: Mr Wilson, are you content for your name to go forward as a nominee?

Mr J Wilson: I accept the nomination.

Mr Speaker: Mr Carrick, are you willing for your name to go forward as a nominee?

Mr Carrick: I accept the nomination.

Mr Speaker: Are there any further proposals?

I hear no further proposals, and the time for proposals has expired.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: In an Assembly of this kind, whose only real parallel is the European Parliament where there are a number of Deputy Speakers or Presidents, it is the usual custom that consideration be given to the opinion of the House with regard to the political divides. It is not so in Westminster, because that is a different type of assembly. It seems strange that in this Assembly, where the main division is either pro- or anti- the agreement, we do not see fit to have at least one anti-agreement Deputy Speaker, yet justice demands that in this type of assembly — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I do not know what that man is blethering about. If he wants, I will give way to him, and he can tell us what he wants to say.

I just want to make that point. We have representation from one of the smallest parties — one of our Deputy Speakers is a member of the Women's Coalition. That is right and proper. However, consideration should be given to the main division that exists in the House. Justice requires that that be considered. It is for that reason that we are putting forward a candidate.

Mr Trimble: I assure the Member, Mr Carrick, who also has the honour of representing Upper Bann, that there is nothing personal in what I am about to say. I deprecate the suggestion that the election of a Deputy Speaker should be anything other than a matter for the House as a whole, having regard to the candidates who have been proposed, their suitability for the position and their ability to represent and to deal with the House as a whole. It would be most unfortunate if this decision became a matter of pro-versus anti-agreement, or Unionist versus Nationalist feeling. Such political considerations should not enter into it. I have proposed Mr J Wilson because I consider that he is eminently suited for the job: his experience in the Business Committee and otherwise suits him for that, and I commend him to the House on those terms.

Mr Speaker: Having received no further requests to speak, I will put the Question in the order that the candidates were proposed earlier.

Question put, That Mr J Wilson be a Deputy Speaker of the Assembly.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 56; Noes 25

AYES

Nationalist

Alex Attwood, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, John Dallat, Bairbre de Brún, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Sean

Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Carmel Hanna, Joe Hendron, John Kelly, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Donovan McClelland, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Eddie McGrady, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMenamin, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, John Tierney.

Unionist

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Esmond Birnie, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Reg Empey, Sam Foster, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, Derek Hussey, Billy Hutchinson, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, David McClarty, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Ken Robinson, George Savage, David Trimble, Jim Wilson.

Other

Eileen Bell, Seamus Close, David Ford, Kieran McCarthy.

NOES

Unionist

Paul Berry, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Patrick Roche, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Cedric Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Total Votes	81	Total Ayes	56 (69.1%)
Nationalist Votes	28	Nationalist Ayes	2 (100.0%)
Unionist Votes	49	Unionist Ayes	24 (49.0%)

Question accordingly agreed to (cross-community vote).

Resolved:

That Mr J Wilson be a Deputy Speaker of the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: I declare that Mr J Wilson has been elected a Deputy Speaker of the House. The nomination of Mr Carrick falls.

12.15 pm

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS:

Suspension of Standing Orders

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) and 10(6) be suspended for Monday 25 February 2002.

This is a technical measure to enable the Assembly to sit for longer.

Mr Speaker: Having no requests to speak, I put the Question to the House. I remind the House that a motion to suspend Standing Orders requires cross-community consent.

Question put and agreed to

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) and 10(6) be suspended for Monday 25 February 2002.

**PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES
(PRESERVED RIGHTS) BILL**

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: No amendments to the Bill have been tabled, and I have received no indication that any Members wish to speak. I therefore propose, by leave of the House, to group the eight clauses, followed by the schedule and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Personal Social Services (Preserved Rights) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

BUDGET BILL

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: No amendments to the Bill have been tabled, and I have received no indication that any Members wish to speak. I therefore propose, by leave of the House, to group the seven clauses, followed by the four schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill

Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the proposed Terms of Reference for the Review of Public Administration.

The review of public administration is one of the major tasks facing the Executive, and will be central to the way in which we deliver, structure and organise our public services in the future. This is the opportunity of a generation to put in place a modern, accountable, effective system of public administration that can deliver a high-quality set of public services to our citizens. It is an opportunity that we must take.

Naturally, the review will attract great interest from the public and the Assembly. In that context, we wrote to the Speaker on 8 January to seek advice on how the Assembly would wish to oversee the review. We understand that the Business Committee has been considering that. We look forward to working with whatever Committee will lead on the review, and we understand that it is the Business Committee's preference that the Committee of the Centre should perform that role, with the involvement of other Committees as appropriate.

The Executive gave a commitment in the Programme for Government to launch the review by spring 2002, and we are on course to meet that target. The Executive have initiated the debate on the review at the earliest possible point, and we are seeking the Assembly's views about the approach to be taken to the review before work starts on it. The Executive are determined that this should be an open and transparent process from the outset, and we are keen to hear the views that will be expressed in this debate.

Members will have received a copy of the proposed terms of reference. They include a set of characteristics against which any system of public administration should be measured and a set of questions to inform the conduct of the review.

We identified the need for a wide-ranging review of the public sector in February 1999. The creation of the Assembly and a regional tier of Government led, rightly, to questions about the overall architecture of government here.

At present Northern Ireland has three Members of the European Parliament; 18 Members of Parliament; and 108 Members of this legislative Assembly. In addition, there are 582 local councillors from 26 district councils and over 2,000 appointees to more than 100 public bodies — all for a population of just over 1.6 million. In that context, therefore, it is only natural for the public to ask whether Northern Ireland is overgoverned.

In the Programme for Government we committed ourselves to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public services in Northern Ireland as well as the accountability for the administration and delivery of those services. The review will consider the structure, responsibilities and delivery of services by local government. It will examine the accountability and co-ordination of public bodies at arm's length from government, and it will consider all elements of public administration against the characteristics that are finally agreed.

Although it is too early to reopen the 18 December 1998 agreement on the distribution of functions among the 11 Departments, the discharge and delivery of services under any one of those Departments can be scrutinised. The review may result in changes to the way in which services are delivered and alterations to the co-ordination and organisation of services.

The introduction of the Executive and the Assembly means that we need to consider the balance with a local government system, the structure and powers of which have remained relatively untouched for 30 years. The review will consider which services should be delivered by regional government, and which should be delivered by local government. It will also consider how many councils are needed and how services should be delivered.

We recognise that many people feel an affinity with their councils and that local councils are seen as responsive to local needs. Against that, there are questions about whether we need 26 councils and how efficient the current system is overall. That highlights the fact that there are balances to be struck between local accountability, public confidence, efficiency and effectiveness.

Of course, there is already much speculation about the outcome of the review. There are fears that councils will be abolished and that towns will lose public-sector jobs. There is, however, no presumption that centralisation, whether structurally or geographically, is better.

12.30 pm

We are committed to examining the scope for the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs in the context of an accommodation review that is currently being led by the Department of Finance and Personnel. The objective is to create the best possible system of public administration. We have set out on that with no predetermined outcomes.

With the establishment of the Assembly, much of the democratic deficit under direct rule has gone. Ministers are accountable to the Assembly, and ultimately to constituents, for the services provided. However, there remain issues of accountability for the review to consider. There is long-standing concern at the extent to which financial powers are vested in quangos, with unelected boards supervising a wide range of public

services. Those bodies, and the people who served on them, worked hard to deliver a service to the people of Northern Ireland throughout the long years of direct rule. However, we must ask if it is still appropriate to continue the administration of public services through those structures, and if not, how the accountability arrangements should be changed.

Accountability is the first of the headings in the terms of reference under the proposed characteristics of public administration. I have already mentioned efficiency, effectiveness and quality of service. I want to speak about several other important dimensions, although in the time available I will not be able to cover all of them.

Equality and human rights are important issues. We must ensure that not only are finite resources appropriately targeted at those most in need but also that the point of delivery for public services is easily accessible to those who have the greatest need of those services. The location of services must, therefore, continue to meet people's needs and contribute to their sense of community. In addition to that, an exercise of that magnitude has to take account of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and New TSN policies.

Co-ordination and integration of services will be an important consideration for the review team. Sometimes it can be difficult for people to know whom to turn to, and to know who is responsible for a particular issue. A prime example of that becomes apparent if one considers those people who live in the Cookstown District Council area. They are in the Southern Education and Library Board area, the Northern Health and Social Services Board area, the western area for roads and planning, and the eastern area for water. It would scarcely be surprising if people were confused about who delivers their services. We must examine whether units of administration can be provided at sub-regional level, or one-stop facilities provided locally to assist customers.

Those are some of the issues covered by the draft terms of reference. We are keen to hear from Members whether other issues should be included explicitly.

I wish to address how we envisage the review being conducted. We want everyone to feel that their views will be listened to and taken into account. We envisage that the review team will hold a range of events around Northern Ireland, which can be attended by anyone. In addition to the traditional means of communication, we have already launched a web site dedicated to the review. People will be able to communicate with the review team by using that site.

It is important that everyone can have confidence in the way in which the review will be carried out. There have been calls for it to be completely independent. However, after careful consideration, we have concluded that the Assembly and the Executive must be central

to the process. This issue is too important and too complex to leave to an appointed body, with elected Members merely coming in at the end of the process. There would be a huge irony in an unelected body examining the appropriateness of other unelected bodies that had responsibility for the administration of public services.

Given that the review has the potential to shape the future governance of Northern Ireland for years to come, it is essential that there is political input at every stage of the process. For that reason we must lead the review and decide its outcome. That said, we are convinced that there must be a strong independent element throughout the review process. We are in the process of identifying and appointing a small number of high-level independent experts, who are recognised for their expertise in governance and organisational change. The independent experts will have an involvement in all aspects of the review, from quality assuring the terms of reference to participating in setting the strategic direction of the review and offering views, evidence and new ideas to the review team and to Ministers.

The experts will not be shackled. It is hoped that they will work closely with the review team. However, the independent experts will have a direct line to Ministers, if they wish to register an alternative approach or a difference of view. We also intend that the review team will be broadly based. We have initiated a selection process to recruit candidates from local government and the wider public sector as full members of the team who will apply their expertise throughout the review.

The Executive will lead the process, working closely with the independent experts, the core team of public officials, the Assembly and its Committees. That will create a balanced process that offers full accountability of members and the Assembly, and which protects the public interest in the light of the suggestion that the review of the public sector is being carried out by the public sector.

Understandably, the delay in initiating the review was criticised. The Executive rightly waited for greater political stability, for the new arrangements of the Executive and the Assembly to bed down and for relationships with local government to become clear. In addition, an earlier start might have had a negative impact on last year's council election by discouraging people from standing again or coming forward for election because of uncertainty.

We look forward to the debate. I anticipate that Members will want to range widely, as well as addressing the proposed terms of reference. It is the start of a long process. We will welcome, and give careful consideration to, all the Assembly's comments, and we look forward to constructive dialogue with Members throughout the

review. I commend the draft terms of reference to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): First, I will comment on the handling of the review. The Committee of the Centre welcomes the publication of the draft terms of reference. The Assembly has waited for the commencement of the review for a long time. Some Members have expected the review since the former Minister of the Environment announced it at the Ulster Unionist Party conference in the autumn of 2000.

The review will be one of the most significant and far-reaching issues to be considered by the Assembly. If it is to be done properly, it will take time and considerable effort from us all. Several statutory Committees have a role: health, environment, education and agriculture, for example. However, the Assembly needs one Committee to take the lead in scrutinising the review through consultation with the other statutory Committees and by providing input on issues within their remit. That Committee will also monitor progress of the review.

Without a lead Committee, how would the Assembly scrutinise the review? To whom would the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, officials and experts answer on cross-cutting issues and matters that do not fall to a statutory Committee? The Committee of the Centre is best placed to undertake that role. I therefore welcome the Business Committee's decision of 12 February that the Committee of the Centre should scrutinise the review process, with statutory Committees involved in the issues that are within their remit. The Committee looks forward to working with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) on the review in its early stages and as the review progresses.

I will raise several issues on behalf of the Committee on the draft terms of reference and the accompanying paper that sets out the parameters for the review. On first reading, the terms of reference appear to be detailed and comprehensive. On further examination, however, they raise as many questions as answers.

We do not know the methodology for the review. For example, will matters such as health and education be examined separately, or will the review be split into subject areas such as accountability issues and the delivery of services? Which bodies and organisations will the review cover? How will existing reviews, such as the Hayes and Burns reviews, feed into the review of public administration?

The work could be complex and time-consuming, and we have not been told what will be the structure for tackling it. Who will appoint the review team, and when will that happen? How much consultation will there be with the relevant Committees before the team

is appointed? An appointment to the Committee of the Regions in Europe was made without any consultation with the Assembly, as opposed to the approach in Scotland. We hear much about accountability, but there was none in that case. To whom will the review team report, and will there be a project board?

In addition the Assembly should be given the overall timescale of the review, together with timescales and interim targets for the completion of each element. No reference to the estimated overall cost is made in the draft terms of reference and the accompanying papers setting out the review's parameters — perhaps that is unsurprising. Should the Assembly not be given an indication of that cost? Is there an overall target for savings?

What will be the procedures for equality proofing the review? Will it be done in stages or only once, when the review nears completion? In the letter from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to the Committee Chairpersons we were told that two levels of independent experts and advice were being sought. The Assembly needs to know the precise functions and costs of those two groups and to whom they will be accountable as the work progresses. How will their work be evaluated?

The review must also address the scope for joined-up government, increased electronic government and one-stop shops, all of which have a role in the delivery of efficient and effective services to the public. According to the papers provided, we must examine what people's needs will be in five or 10 years' time. Should such a comprehensive and strategic review not assess the needs of people over the next 20 or 30 years?

As Chairperson of the Committee, I ask the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to tell us when they will return to the Assembly with revised terms of reference, and the target date for the launch of the review.

I wish to raise other matters in my capacity as a Lagan Valley representative. Why does the review not cover the functions that arise from the Belfast Agreement: the Assembly, the North/South bodies, the British-Irish Council, the Civic Forum, and other matters? The First Minister said that it was too early to review those matters. When will the review be complete? I suspect that by that time, it would be appropriate to investigate those matters.

The First Minister mentioned the numbers of public representatives and appointees to quangos. In Northern Ireland there is one quango appointee for every 800 people and one public representative for every 2000 people. Democratic representation costs each Northern Ireland constituency some £1 million. That includes the cost of MPs, MLAs, local councillors, their offices and their administrative back-up staff. How is it possible to have a review that takes powers from Departments

— without examining them — and gives more power to the councils? The 11 Departments were set up on 18 December 1998. It could be argued that the issue has been "over-equalitised", however I was unable to check the existence of that word with David Ervine. In my part of the world the appropriate expression is "over-egging the pudding". Fifty per cent of the Ministers were to represent Nationalists, and 50% were to represent Unionists. I suspect that there will be an election before the review is complete.

12.45 pm

I would be surprised if the Unionist/Nationalist mix of Ministers in the 11 Departments were fifty-fifty after that, and perhaps now is the time to consider that issue in a more focused way, rather than in a way that would ensure an equal number of Nationalists and Unionists in the Northern Ireland Executive.

Since the Belfast Agreement was signed in 1998, £80 million has been taken from the public purse in Northern Ireland to cover additional administration costs. We cannot ignore that. It was supposed to have been dealt with at an early stage, and promises were made about quangos during the run-up to the Assembly elections.

Approximately £20 million is being spent on the North/South bodies. How can we have a review of public administration without including everything that was established under the terms of the Belfast Agreement? The review is not comprehensive; it is not all-embracing; it will not wholeheartedly deal with the issues that affect the people of Northern Ireland. We cannot have a proper review of public administration unless we encompass all issues.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): I welcome and support the terms of reference as they are. It is good to have a debate on them, and it will be beneficial to have the review up and running as soon as possible.

The Department for Employment and Learning has a relatively unique experience in this regard. Recently, it subsumed one of the bodies under its control, the Training and Employment Agency, which was a Next Steps agency. Other Departments may learn how to reduce the number of semi-free-standing bodies related to their administration from such experience. Admittedly, it is not yet clear how far that change has increased the effectiveness of service delivery or cost efficiency.

Invest Northern Ireland, an agency of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, also merits a mention. Its creation resulted in the grouping of several similar agencies, which reduced the total number of that Department's agencies.

The Department for Employment and Learning is responsible for training. The Committee for

Employment and Learning wonders whether there is a training issue relating to the membership of the 100-plus quangos, boards, agencies and partnerships, which, as the First Minister rightly said, have more than 2,000 persons on their oversight and management boards. The Committee is concerned that, in future, those people should receive better training and come with a guarantee that they are equipped to fulfil their remit and tasks.

Most notably, that concern relates to financial oversight responsibility. For example, the boards of governors of several further education colleges have run into severe financial difficulties in recent years. However, the Committee suspects that that is indicative of a more general problem in so-called “quangoland” in which administrative boards do not have sufficient financial management or accountancy expertise to check that public money is being adequately and properly used. The Committee suggests that consideration of the selection criteria for the boards of future administrative bodies and better training for the persons who volunteer to sit on such bodies be added to the terms of reference.

The rest of my remarks are made as an MLA rather than as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. Mr Poots raised the number of Departments and their functions, and I am sure that others will also do so. I do not deny what Mr Poots said about the increase in departmental running costs. However, it should be put on record that, on the benefit side of the ledger, we have gained from having 11 Departments as opposed to six. They have enabled us to focus more on certain issues.

The remit of the new Department for Employment and Learning used to be subsumed in the large empire of the Department of Education, and for many reasons that was arguably not good. For example, the needs of further education colleges were ignored compared to those of schools.

The creation of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development was good because of the added emphasis that was placed on rural development. In the long run, that Department must deal with much more than simply maintaining the farming industry. We must diversify into alternative rural-based economic and other activities.

The old Department of the Environment was similar to the gigantic eastern European public administrative bodies. It was simply too big, and its remit too wide-ranging, to be economically efficient and administratively effective.

The terms of reference of the review represent a great opportunity. This is possibly the first opportunity to look at these issues in depth since the McCrory Report of about three decades ago. It gives us a chance to look, as he did in the early 1970s, at the efficiency of public administration and at the appropriate level of

desirable accountability to the electorate and those who use public services.

A key point is that form should follow function. The challenge for the review and the independent experts who will be advising it will be to identify what can most fittingly be added to the functions of, for example, the district councils. Once that is done, the second step will be to decide the appropriate size of those councils, given the economies of scale that will relate to the functions that they may have in the future.

I support the motion.

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the consultation paper and the involvement of the Assembly and its Committees during the consultation period. As we progress with the review, we will need one of the Assembly Committees to manage it on our behalf. It should not necessarily be the Committee of the Centre, which already deals with the business of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Perhaps we should consider which other Committees could steer the progress of the review.

We must also take account of independent views. Reviews of public administration have been carried out in other European countries. We should draw on that work, identify best practice elsewhere and consider reflecting that in our review.

The local government units are an important part of the review, and as a member of such a unit — and the only local government unit that has a county boundary that coincides with the unit boundary — I think that we should examine closely how the units that we arrive at identify with local communities. It has worked well in Fermanagh, and, despite local government controversies from time to time, members have often managed to overcome any difficulties and work well together for the greater good of that area. We should give careful consideration to that.

Several characteristics have been identified in the document, and I will mention some that I consider important. First, no characteristic is more important than equality. The governing factor in the delivery of public services must be equal access to them for all. The review should result in structures and mechanisms being developed that can deliver those services fairly and equitably.

Secondly, accountability is important, and it is mentioned in the document. There is a widely held view that many decisions taken on the delivery of services are taken by people who are not democratically accountable or even close to the communities that are most affected by those decisions. It is imperative, therefore, that democratically elected and accountable representatives play a full role in making decisions on the delivery of services that affect the lives of so many.

Partnership is a third important characteristic that is referred to in the document, but it does not have a heading of its own. Many non-elected individuals have specialist expertise, and they can, and do, make an important contribution to the decision-making process. They must be allowed to continue to make that input in a way that complements, and does not exclude, the role of elected representatives.

Fourthly, there is the issue of transparency. Last week, I heard that one quango, on which there are no elected representatives, was denying elected representatives access to the minutes of its meetings. That is most unsatisfactory. We must have better practices on transparency. Local government is a good example of transparency in the delivery of services. However, that does not mean that local government practices cannot be improved upon.

Finally, I wish to address efficiency. I recognise the good work that is being carried out daily by councils and health and education boards. I am aware of the uncertainties that the ongoing speculation about this review has created among public-sector workers. Such workers must be reassured that public services cannot be delivered without the existing, dedicated staff.

Much of the discussion on the review centres on councils. However, we must remember that councils are currently responsible for 3% of public expenditure, so the debate needs to take place in a wide and a balanced manner. It will enable us to make progress on a balanced examination of how services are currently delivered.

We all know of the complications within Health Service management. Ordinary people do not understand the present confusing arrangements, with the maze of structures from the Department through to the boards and trusts.

1.00 pm

I remind Members that this matter was referred to in the Hayes review. It recommended structural changes to coincide with a new arrangement for acute hospital services. Therefore, we have to decide whether some Health Service structures need to be changed as part of the acute hospital services review, which we hope will take place this year, or be addressed as part of this wider and longer public service review. That requires more detailed discussion.

I am not saying that the structures recommended in the Hayes Report have to be implemented, rather that further consideration is necessary. The review must look at which agency, or agencies working collaboratively, can best deliver services to communities. I welcome this opportunity to bring the decision-making process closer to the people and do it through a process governed by equality in both its structure and its delivery.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I want to make several points, and one of my Colleagues will deal with the terms of reference in more detail later.

I was interested to hear Mr Poots making forward projections about the likely breakdown of Nationalist and Unionist representatives and how that will affect the various Departments. Given his long-standing democratic credentials, I would have thought he would have been clamouring for majority rule as opposed to some method to deal with that, as he suggested. Nevertheless, perhaps people move on. It is important to recognise that we need to move on the basis of inclusion and make sure that equality is built into any system of governance that we devise.

I want to put on record my disappointment that it has taken over three years from the announcement of the review to bring us to the point today where we are being asked to take note of the terms of reference, although I welcome that. It gives us something firm to deal with, and I look forward to the work that has to be done. However, it is important to record our disappointment at the long delay. I am not making recriminations; rather I am trying to ensure that the reason for that delay is not carried forward into the work itself.

The First Minister mentioned some reasons for the delay, which were more to do with politics than technicalities. It may be fair to say that political judgements had to be made, but, arguably, if the Assembly and the Executive had got down to this important work three years ago, we might not have had some of the political difficulties that we did have. It is important to note that.

In their report the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister listed the 582 councillors, 26 councils, 108 MLAs, 18 MPs, and three MEPs, not to mention the 150-odd quangos with approximately 2,000 public appointees. Many of those public appointees have carried out some sterling work on behalf of the community over the years. However, many — and Mr Gallagher made a relevant point about this — have been unaccountable for years. In fact, looking at the cost of those quangos, the range of activities those people are involved in and the political who's who of those bodies, I do not think that many have served us well.

It must be remembered that many of those agencies were set up because of many years of misrule here. Forms of government were either abolished or had their powers removed substantially, so we must bear in mind where we are coming from, given the quagmire throughout public administration. The benchmark must now be the institutions that were established under the Good Friday Agreement. Further work is necessary in order to streamline or improve the functions of government, whether here or elsewhere. However, there are specific terms for the review of the Good Friday Agreement and the institutions contained therein, and people will look forward to that.

I hope that we can continue to improve the way in which we represent the people and the way in which

we deliver important services. However, it is also important that there should be further explanations from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for the three years it has taken to reach this point, primarily to ensure that we do not have any further delays in the future.

I welcome the manner in which we hope to deal with this major programme of work. There is no doubt that it will take a long time. It is heartening to hear the First Minister talk about the way in which the Assembly, other representatives and organisations will have a full, proper and open input. However, I hope that we will not have the type of spin that we have had from the recently appointed press officer for the Executive, in which presentation rather than substance is the order of the day. For instance, last week in 'The Sunday Times' there was a suggestion that one reason for the three-year delay was that many Members are also councillors and therefore resistant to change. I have not heard of any councillor resisting change for the sake of it. My party will actively pursue change, particularly in local government and in how it is delivered. This is not about whether there are 26 councils — that is a matter for debate — this is about examining the role and functions of those district councils and, more importantly, about ensuring that they will have to discharge their business fairly and equitably.

There have been some improvements in recent years through local government, perhaps because there has been a thaw in certain places with regard to broader politics. However, no one can say that local government operates fairly, and the delay in the review has put further back, probably quite considerably, changes to boundaries, which mean that the current unfair system of government will continue for the next few years. The councils and the boundaries that currently exist do not represent properly the demographic changes in our community. Local government will have to be much fairer.

I recommend that we move forward with the local government review and examine the principles contained in the institutions. Although people criticise them, the potential for abuse is less than in local government, because proportionality, equality, safeguards, checks and balances are built into the system, and that must come across into local government too.

The review of local government and the other reviews should proceed quickly and address proportionality, particularly with regard to local government. That will ensure that the people who are represented, and those who have the privilege of representing them, are treated fairly and equitably.

The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister should address the reviews that are currently under way. There have been several recent attacks on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety about the

number of reviews in that Department. Some of them are being held up by the review of public administration.

How will the reviews dovetail to be conducted within a time frame and how can the required outcome fulfil the terms of references? There is the review of local government, quangos and public administration. There is also the review of the rates system, and I fail to see how that can be conducted independently of the review of local government. There is also the review of the Civil Service, the review of government accommodation and the question of public appointments. How will all those reviews dovetail?

It is important that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister give us a wider vision. We must see those reviews dovetailing to a point where we can deliver effective and accountable governance to the people in a reasonable period of time. I look forward to Members' responses.

Mr Close: I welcome the launch of the review of public administration in Northern Ireland. I notice the slippage that has taken place with regard to its launch; it is undoubtedly overdue. I shall be charitable and say that it is better late than never, and I will do so hand on heart as I am a reasonable person.

My main concern about the delay is that this is undoubtedly one area where time has cost money. We know the difficulties that various Departments are under due to lack of finance. I say without fear of contradiction that, due to the delay, hundreds of millions of pounds have been badly spent over the past three years. Again, I am being charitable.

To say that Northern Ireland is overgoverned is something of an understatement. We cannot rehearse the numbers often enough to get the message home. We have three MEPs, 18 MPs, 108 MLAs and either 582 or 586 councillors, and those are just figures at a governmental level for a, lest anyone forget, population of 1.6 million. I should also mention the plethora of health boards, health trusts, education and library boards, planning and roads divisions, Next Steps agencies, and the layer of other bodies that apparently provide useful services to the people of Northern Ireland. Again, I am being charitable. Comparisons will undoubtedly be made with the size of populations in other parts of the United Kingdom and the number of people elected to represent them.

I would like to be able to say that due to all these wonderful layers of bureaucracy, administration and elected representatives the people of Northern Ireland were getting a wonderful deal. However, that would not be a truthful observation. More importantly, those whom we represent and those who send us to the Assembly and other places would not agree with such a sweeping statement. They believe that their money

— taxpayers' money — is being squandered through layer upon layer of bureaucracy and administration.

Members may recall that I have referred to administration in Northern Ireland as somewhat akin to the onion. Those who have any culinary skills will recognise that as one tries to peel away the skins of the onion, it brings tears to one's eyes. I have no doubt that as the skins of bureaucracy and administration in Northern Ireland are gradually peeled away until we get to the hub, many tears will flow in Northern Ireland.

Mr S Wilson: Are those red onions?

Mr Close: They can be whatever colour of onions the Member likes. I have no doubt that it will cause a degree of pain throughout the administration and bureaucracy here. I am convinced that we must all go through that pain, because we must be to the fore in demonstrating savings and effective use of taxpayers' money.

For example, there are 26 local authorities in Northern Ireland. Having been involved in local government for quite a number of years, I know a little about it, and on average, 60% to 70% of the rates raised in local government go on administration.

1.15 pm

The rates raised at district council level are between about £250 million and £300 million per annum. If one applies the 60% figure to that, one can see the potential saving if, for example, the number of local authorities were reduced. There are hundreds of millions of pounds to be saved, and we must focus on that.

The most difficult question is who should carry out this review. There has been a great deal of talk in the press and media — and it has been mentioned this morning — about spin, the bad name that politicians get and the way in which they conduct their affairs. I emphasise that that is not so much in relation to this House as to other places. When politicians are seen to be examining themselves, and when they consult, the answer that comes back is invariably the answer that the politicians want to end up with, not the answer that the people demand. If we allow the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) or the Committee of the Centre to conduct this review, we will not get the result that the people who sent us here demand and deserve.

Therefore, I think that the terms of reference are slanted in the wrong direction. I appreciate that they will consult with a certain degree of independence, but we are putting the cart before the horse. This review should be carried out by an independent commission appointed by OFMDFM, and it should draw on the various levels of expertise available through elected Members, those who currently serve on quangos, et cetera. I do not have a problem with that. The focus must be on independence or we could stand accused of

a hotchpotch job suitable only to politicians. That would be a disservice to the general public.

I said that I was in a charitable mood today, and a little bit of charity towards the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister would not go amiss. Another reason for not having OFMDFM carry out this review is that it is overburdened. If it is not — and I stress that I am being charitable — why is there a delay in producing business for the Assembly to be getting on with? Why is there slippage in the various areas in the Programme for Government? I understand that it has hit 20% or 30% of its targets. Obviously there is a problem, and that problem is the amount of business currently flowing through that office. It would be unfair, impracticable and somewhat stupid to add to that, if we want some sort of an out-turn in any reasonable period of time.

Dr Birnie: I am confused. On the one hand Mr Close has been arguing for less government, but now he is arguing for more legislation and, therefore, more government. Which would he prefer?

Mr Close: I am at a loss to comprehend the import of the question. I understood that the job of an elected body such as this was to legislate. I vividly recall that during the negotiations we clamoured for, and insisted that this should be, a legislative House. Our job is to legislate and bring about the necessary changes that those who send us here demand and need.

My point was that it appears that the amount of legislation generated is being clogged and blocked in OFMDFM, and to add another layer by asking it to conduct this review would be to overburden it. For that reason we must make this review more independent.

I have touched on the financial issues; I do not wish to overburden the House with them. However, another issue is worthy of consideration, and it ties in with Mr Maskey's comments. Several reviews have begun recently. The review of the rating system is directly relevant to local government and its powers. Therefore, if, within the overall review, we shall be looking at the powers of local government and the number of local authorities, should we not be dovetailing the review of the rating system?

Mr McCartney: I suggest to the hon Member that the reason for all those reviews is that they are often a method used to justify doing nothing.

Mr Close: My Colleagues and I pointed out that the initial Programme for Government was littered with reviews, which provided an opportunity to push things further down the pipe. The wheelbarrow approach to pushing things in front of you appears to have been adopted. That may be a little uncharitable. The argument that we are a new Administration that would take time to get to grips with matters was valid two

and a half years ago. We have been in existence now for a considerable time. I am reminded of a television advertisement in which a young fellow walks through a field with his grandfather, discussing results. It is all summed up by results and productivity, which are questionable at the moment.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Is it not amazing that although this is a legislative Assembly, there is no legislation before the House? Years have gone by, and there will shortly be another election to the House. What legislation have the Executive presented to the House?

Mr Close: A dearth of legislation has come before the House. A large question mark hangs over the Executive and their operation. I am not part of the Executive. I do not know what goes on in the Executive. However, it strikes me that they have had opportunities to be more productive. They should let us know what is causing delays. Those who send us here expect and demand more.

I shall return to the theme of the various ongoing reviews. I mentioned the review of local government; there is also a review of office accommodation. How can a firm conclusion be reached on the amount of accommodation that will be required in future, if we do not know how many buildings will be freed up as a result of the reduction in the numbers of quangos, local authorities, Roads Service offices, et cetera? The review that has been launched today must look at the overall situation. We need clear and unambiguous statements and results, not a mishmash. At present, we are seen to be going in several directions simultaneously.

That leads me to the number of Departments. The reason we have 11 Departments, as given in the terms of reference, is that that number was agreed in the Good Friday Agreement. Those Departments were established for all sorts of good reasons. I took part in the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement. I do not have a problem with the number of Departments that were established then. However, if we are going to embark on a review, that issue must be dovetailed with the overall administrative review. A reference to the need for a review of the institutions is included in the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. That review was to take place within four years. All sorts of facile arguments have been advanced about when that four years starts, or when it ends. Anyone with half a brain cell would recognise that that review should commence four years from the referendum. That is the only focus date that is clearly identified in the Good Friday Agreement. Four years from the date of the referendum is May 2002. It is February 2002. Can we not dovetail those two matters? Is that beyond the gift, the intelligence and the strength of those who are proposing the terms of reference? I do not think so.

In conclusion, ratepayers and taxpayers seek transparency and accountability in the expenditure of their

money. They seek efficiency and effectiveness, and those should be the prime motives and goals of the review, which must be seen to be an independent review of the public sector.

Mr B Hutchinson: In such debates, Members often repeat each other's comments. I welcome the review; it is long overdue. Members have waited for it since the Assembly began, and although we should welcome it, we must be cautious about its outcome. The review is not only about saving money; it is about making improvements. Our aims should be clear. The numbers of quangos and public representatives were mentioned. Those quangos must be removed and replaced by public representatives who were elected to carry out those functions.

There is a reluctance to review Departments, but we need to ensure that they work well and provide the necessary services. For example, it is nonsense that the Department of the Environment should be responsible for road safety while the Department for Regional Development is responsible for traffic calming. We must examine the possibility that we could operate more effectively with fewer Departments. If that is the outcome of the review, we should make the necessary improvements.

We should not regard decisions as the Holy Grail because they are based on the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement. We need to make the Government work in the best way possible. If we made a mistake, we should admit that and rectify it. We should not protect a system because we believe that it is provided for in the Good Friday Agreement. The Good Friday Agreement does not state how many Departments there should be. We must make that decision, and this is an opportune time to do so.

We must examine how to provide the best possible services. Alex Maskey mentioned verbal attacks on the Health Minister as reported in the media. She said that this is all about money; it is not. It is about how we provide health — the way in which we provide it is wrong. Many who queue for treatment in accident and emergency units do not need to be there. They could be dealt with by GPs or at health centres. We must focus on ways to free up services, rather than continue in the same way. It is untrue that the only way to deal with the problem is to throw money at it.

The situation in education boards is similar. We need managers, not administrators, in health and education. We must bring the services closer to the people, not further away. We must examine and change those factors. If we do not make changes, we will continue to throw money at the same services. Money is not the question. We must examine the services to find the answers.

Mr McCartney: On the basis of the old Ulster saying that half a loaf is better than no bread, I offer a

cautious welcome to the proposed review. Everyone knows, and it is generally accepted, that the people of Northern Ireland are being slowly crushed — some might say buried — under a great avalanche of bureaucracy.

As many Members have said, it was promised at an early stage that the bureaucracy, which consists of unelected people spending — according to one expert — £5.5 billion, would be removed, or at least severely pruned. Nothing of the kind has happened to date.

1.30 pm

One has to look at the source of our problems. In addressing reform of how we are governed, we have to look at whether we are getting value for money and whether this form of administration is fundamentally democratic. The source of our problems is twofold. First, to afford some semblance of a democracy that was not entirely there during the period of direct rule, the NIO invested heavily in an army, culled from the great and the good, on which it could rely as having safe hands — not necessarily safe for the benefit of the community, but politically safe for the benefit of the Northern Ireland Office. The result was that we had an increasing multiplication of quangos and unelected bodies that were administering the place.

When the Assembly was set up, it was faced with two problems. One that I have referred to in the past, but that has not been effectively dealt with in the Chamber, is the black hole of underinvestment in the basic infrastructure of Northern Ireland at the date when we accepted devolution. Economists and financial experts have said that it may be as much as £9 billion.

I raised this point two weeks ago when Dr Farren was speaking on the Budget Estimates. However, he did not deign to respond on that matter as he did not deign to respond to the addresses of Mr Close and myself on quangos. We asked two questions: when would administration be reformed, and what could be done about the missing £9 billion of investment in infrastructure? Dr Farren's response was to make a snide remark that I was indulging myself in one of my rare visits to the Assembly. That is absolute rubbish. I speak as frequently as anyone else, and more frequently than most, in plenary sessions.

The day after Dr Farren had refused to deal with that matter in the House, there was an announcement from another Department that this great reform of administration was starting. Three days later, in a public address to several businessmen and other financial experts outside the House, Dr Farren said that there was a deficit of £5 billion in infrastructure that would have to be made available in the next three to four years. We should be getting responses in the Chamber to the questions raised here, not having them replied to three or four days later in the press.

The first problem, from which all of these difficulties, including administration, arise, is the failure of those responsible for negotiating the Belfast Agreement to say to the United Kingdom Treasury "You have underinvested here for 30 years, and there is no way that we can make good the absence of capital investment out of the block grant. Therefore, we need an undertaking that, in addition to the block grant, you will begin to pay back some of the money that you saved and pocketed by underinvesting in Northern Ireland over many years." That is the first problem.

The second problem is, of course, connected to that form of government. For 30 years, Northern Ireland was governed through quangos, and we are now burdened with them. We have the twin problems of gross underinvestment and a black hole that cannot be filled out of an annual block grant that is barely sufficient to keep the country ticking over. The necessary money will never be saved unless it is made good by central Government.

Secondly, we are overburdened with the residue of administration arising from the quango system. That problem was apparently recognised at an early date; we have had promises of review after review, but nothing has been done about it until now. My reservation is that the review may be lengthy because, as I think the previous Member said, a review is not action. We need action, not further talk.

What is to be done? The problem of quangos must be addressed swiftly and in a practical way. Mr Close mentioned the absence of — I hesitate to use the cliché — joined-up government. I would prefer co-ordinated government. Mr Close pointed out that a review of accommodation does not go well with a review of the number of people who may be required to fill that accommodation. It simply cannot be done.

The Executive seem to be lacking a strategic grasp of what has to be done. The Departments appear just to function and consider how their own problems can be reviewed, without the review being joined up to see how it will fit into the fabric of an overall strategy for government. The strategic view is simply not there.

In the past, I have also highlighted the number of lobby groups and quangos that exist. There seem to be groups and quangos to deal with everything — including, as I once said, perhaps unhygienically, in the Assembly, nose-picking and bottom-scratching. The only evidence that these people do anything is a very expensive and glossy brochure, generally consisting of columns of expenditure, which no one reads.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Printed by W & G Baird.

Mr McCartney: Printed by W & G Baird.

Where do we go from here? As Mr Close pointed out, we have a population of 1.6 million. I will not recite

all the layers of the onion, though I do feel like weeping when I look at it. Are these layers to be permitted to continue, or will they be endlessly reviewed? The problem must be promptly addressed.

The people in those quangos to be reviewed can say, as was once said 2,000 years ago, "Physician, heal thyself." The quango reviewers are really the biggest quango of all. We have 108 MLAs operating 11 Departments. As a result, in the newspapers and other media yesterday and today there has been talk of the £4 million spent on constituency allowances and travelling. I have no doubt that much of that money has been properly spent. Many Members work hard in their constituencies and offer a constituency service.

However, is it really necessary to have six Members for each constituency, and, where those MLAs represent different parties, to have a multiplicity of constituency offices when the 18 constituencies are already served, or should be served, by the constituency office of the Member of Parliament? It is not a question of how individual Members spend their allowances; it is a fundamental question of whether 108 Members are required.

Similarly, do we need 11 Departments that not only possess an army of formal civil servants but a multiplying hoard of special advisers? How many special advisers do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have, and how much are they being paid? Is it £60,000, £70,000 or £80,000 a year? On what issues do they advise that the experts in the Civil Service cannot? The problem is approaching crisis point for the United Kingdom Government, but it should also be addressed here.

During all the toing and froing that took place at the time of discussions on the number of Executive Departments that we were to have, I was asked to meet Mr David Trimble and Mr Séamus Mallon, who were then the Ministers-in-waiting. I said, "Gentlemen, I have one question to address to you, and, depending on the answer, I will not detain you. Will the number of Departments be determined purely on political considerations, or is it to be determined on the number required to give the best value for money and to provide the most economic and the most effective service?" The answer was that it was political.

As recently as two weeks ago, Dr Maurice Hayes appeared in the BBC radio programme 'Inside Politics'. He said — and I hope that I paraphrase him correctly — that the number of Departments could no longer be justified and that we must have grown-up or mature Government, because, as has already been pointed out, various functions were cannibalised in order to provide 10 Departments for political reasons. Experienced civil servants were disorientated through being shifted about. For example, planning is within the purview of three separate Departments, as are the prevention of

accidents and responsibility for the roads. The Departments are a complete mess.

Before we start to examine the quangos, we must examine the Assembly.

Several Members, including Mr Billy Hutchinson and Mr Seamus Close, said that we must address the issue and cost of overgovernment in the Assembly before we can address the various other local government bodies, et cetera.

Two weeks ago, during the course of debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates, I said — and this figure is off the cuff — that £570 million was being requested as an Estimate for next year. The briefing paper indicated that that sum was usually 45% of the estimated amount of money to run for the whole year. After doing a simple calculation, which may not be precise, it looked as though the total sum for administration for next year was £1.2 billion. I do not know what proportion of the block grant that is, but it seems to me as though it may be in excess of 10%.

When we say that the function of government is serving the people — providing the best value and most effective service, particularly in education, health, the environment, housing, and so on — we have to justify how that huge percentage of the block grant is providing the best service possible.

1.45 pm

The electorate looks at the Assembly and sees that administration costs £1.2 billion — and that may not be the whole amount. That is a large proportion of the block grant. Such expenditure might be justified if the public were getting a "Rolls Royce" form of government with effective hospital, education and roads systems, and with money available for the Westlink, for example, in order to stop Dublin taking over entirely and sucking out all of Northern Ireland's transport that is currently going through the Port of Belfast. There may be no money for that.

If the public were getting a "Rolls Royce" service in those aspects of government, then it could be said that "You get what you pay for — really good government costs money." However, that is not the case. The public is seeing an enormous proportion of the block grant being spent on administration — on various layers of the onion — and possibly the worst hospital waiting lists in Europe, 50% worse than those in the United Kingdom that are the subject of vast public criticism and complaint.

The public sees an education system in which many schools need upgraded facilities, and in which there is no money available for infrastructure and barely enough to cover running costs. The environment, the roads, water and various other services will soon become Third-World standard unless there is further capital

investment. The public is not getting what it deserves because of the inertia of the Executive, the absence of a strategic plan and the failure to have co-ordinated work between the excessive number of Departments.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): I wish to inform the House of the Committee's view of the draft terms of reference for the review, as set out in the First Minister's letter to the Committee dated 12 February 2002. The Committee discussed the review at its meeting on 21 February, and I subsequently wrote to Ministers. The Committee believes, as do many Members, that the review is long overdue. I say that despite the First Minister's having said to the House today that

"The Executive gave a commitment in the Programme for Government to launch the review by spring 2002, and we are on course to meet that target."

I remind the House that the then Minister of the Environment announced at the Ulster Unionist Party conference in autumn 2000 that there would be a review of public administration and local government. Following that announcement the Committee wrote to the Minister and received a response dated 11 October 2000:

"In the Assembly debate on the Agenda for Government on 3 July 2000 the Deputy First Minister stated that the Executive Committee 'would set in hand over the coming months a fundamental appraisal of the structures and location of public services' ... It is the Minister's intention to inform that process, through consultation, thereby ensuring that delay in the important area of local government is kept to a minimum ... Executive Committee papers are confidential, but the Minister will consult with the Environment Committee as progress is made."

The then Deputy First Minister made his statement on 3 July 2000, and the Minister of the Environment wrote his letter on 11 October 2000. Both said that the review would happen in the coming months. The letter of October 2000 said that any delay in the important review of local government would be kept to a minimum.

The Ministers are now latching onto the promise that was made by the Executive in their Programme for Government to suggest that the target of initiating the review by spring 2002 has been met. We have sought on numerous occasions to find out where the review of local government has gone. The Minister promised that he would consult the Committee for the Environment as progress was made. I suppose that his difficulty was that no progress was being made, and, therefore, there was no need for consultation. That is why my Committee believes that the review is long overdue.

In a letter received by the Committee on 12 February 2002, the Ministers said that they wished to ensure that the review was initiated in an open and transparent way. I ask for the whole review to be conducted in such a manner. The Ministers' letter and paper reveal little about the process, approach and structure of the review.

Failing that, my Committee suggests that an options paper addressing a full range of proposals for reform of public administration should be published, followed by detailed draft proposals. There should then be a draft report on actual recommendations based on the selected proposals, followed by a final report. However, we do not want the review to be without targets. Target dates for bringing the final report before the Assembly and acting on it must be set.

As a statutory departmental Committee with scrutiny, policy development and consultative roles in relation to the Department of the Environment, the Committee must be fully consulted at all stages leading to the final report. The Committee particularly wishes to be consulted on the formulation of options, detailed draft proposals and recommendations on the reform of local government, as that is part of the Minister of the Environment's primary responsibilities.

My Committee submitted some specific comments to the Ministers on the detail of the proposed draft terms of reference. These included the need for a reference to review arrangements for policy formulation and bringing forward legislation and the need to reflect the key policy theme of promoting sustainable living, as set out in the Programme for Government. The Committee also suggested that the review team should ensure that environmental policy impacts are considered for all key public policies to achieve effective protection of the environment, prudent use of natural resources and high and sustainable levels of economic growth.

I urge the Ministers to come forward with proposals for the review that give clarity on the approach, structure, timetable and consultative arrangements. Written answers, for example, reporting a non-defined first stage of 12 to 18 months, are not good enough. Members have waited long enough for this important review and deserve full and proper proposals, swiftly followed by action, with regular progress reported to the House.

Page 5 of the First Minister's statement reads:

"Given that this review has the potential to shape the future governance of Northern Ireland for years to come, it is essential that there is a political input at every stage of the process. For that reason we need to lead the Review and decide its outcome."

Who are the "we"? Later, it states:

"Throughout, the Executive will lead the process, working closely with the independent experts, the core team of public sector officials, the Assembly and its Committees."

Committees should be encouraged that they got the end of the tail — "its Committees". On behalf of my Committee I make it clear that we will not be put to the end of anything but will carry out our full statutory role of scrutiny of any issues under the remit of the Department of the Environment, including local district councils.

I ask the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister; who will appoint those persons? Taking off my Chairperson's hat, I will take careful note of who is chosen and whether the First Minister and Deputy First Minister make these appointments. On many occasions, whether in appointment to a review or any other body, the Democratic Unionist Party had no representation whatsoever. The first criterion set down by the First Minister was accountability. Openness and transparency must be the very centre of the whole process so that everyone can see it from beginning to end. We will watch the next part of the process with great care.

In his opening remarks, the First Minister stated that it is not time to look into the review of the House and its workings. I cannot accept his reason for that. Many people believe that it is not too early to look into the distribution of functions among the 11 Departments and, consequently, the workings of the House. Strong opinion was expressed in the debate on the matter. In the light of that, what action by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will take account of the views of Assembly Members — or do they feel that they are above the opinion of the Assembly?

Mr Dalton: I welcome the review. However, as a caveat, I hope that it is more than a review. I hope that it will lead to action. It seems to me, and to many other Members, that for a long time we have seen reviews, consultations and discussions — but nothing has been done. Nothing ever changes. The people on the street do not see that anything gets better or that what we do in the House is worthwhile.

2.00 pm

It is essential that we implement a review that will lead to real action and change, which will show the electorate that the Assembly benefits them.

Some DUP Members' comments are interesting. Recently, Peter Robinson commented forcibly on the number of Departments and the over-administration in Government. Those comments were amusing, given that they came from the member of a party that, according to an article by Mr Alex Kane in the 'News Letter' at the weekend, has claimed £20 million during the lifetime of the Assembly — some anti-agreement party.

Peter Robinson, his wife and both their sons work for this place. According to Mr Kane's article, that adds up to a Swiss bank family Robinson fortune of £181,000 a year — so much for bringing down the Belfast Agreement — that was a sideswipe.

It is essential that in Northern Ireland we look seriously — *[Interruption]*.

Rev Dr William McCrea: You are pathetic.

Mr Dalton: Interestingly, Mr McCrea's son hopes to join us next year as a Mid Ulster representative. In

local newspaper reports Mr McCrea seems uncertain of whether he represents Mid Ulster or South Antrim.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Don't be so cheap.

Mr Dalton: Members agree that Northern Ireland is over-represented. Too many arms of Government overlap and often duplicate their functions. Do we need four health boards? I have yet to be convinced of what essential functions the health boards carry out that could not be fulfilled by the Department. Why do we have them? The Minister intends to introduce another layer of administration between the health boards and the hospital trusts. It seems that rather than reduce the overall amount of government, we are increasing it.

We have 18 Members of Parliament. What is the cost of those MPs? There are 108 Assembly Members, who are supposed to deal with devolved matters. Meanwhile, the 18 MPs are trying to deal with the same matters. How much does it cost Departments to liaise with MPs on devolved issues that are the subject of discussion by elected Members in this House?

Do we need 26 district councils? Before we decide how many Government bodies we need, we must ask some hard questions about the number of existing Government bodies and what we are trying to do with them. Rather than assume that the number of local government bodies should be decided according to the number of counties, we must consider what they are trying to provide. When we have determined that, we can consider how many we need. Given the size of this House and all the other administration, it will be hard to persuade anyone that we need 26 district councils. It is interesting that several Members, who are members of district councils and claim financial reward for that, have not declared that interest today.

Mr McCartney's points were interesting. It was pleasing that, for once, he did not give us an exposition on why the Belfast Agreement is the root of all evil in society. Instead, he focused on the key issues. He said that the structures that existed before the creation of the Assembly, the institutions and the Executive were introduced by the Government to deal with a shortfall in representation. However, we have inherited those structures and, having created new institutions and an Executive here, we do not need to retain them.

The review should consider whether the structures should be retained or what could be put in their place. We should not simply shuffle the pack. We should not be satisfied at the end of the review to draw neat charts that show to whom each body reports without any great change to the overall cost of administration.

It is essential that the review streamlines public administration and makes it more efficient. In addition, unfortunately, it will probably reduce the number of people that work in the public sector. If it is deemed

that certain education and other boards are not necessary, people who work for them will not have a position in the future. That is a hard choice, but it is one that the House must make. We cannot have a review of public administration that simply results in four health board chief executives being reshuffled into senior positions on equivalent salaries in other places, which is often exactly what happens after a review of government administration. The staff will tell you themselves that they are not afraid of reorganisation because they know that they will be put into another job on the same salary.

In carrying out such a review and making changes, it is important that we deliver to the people who put us here some genuine change in the administration and in the delivery of services. We must get rid of some of the health boards and expensive bodies and spend the money on new schools, hospitals and other things that people want the public administration to provide instead of an ever-expanding number of managers, administrators and MLAs.

It is essential that this House is part of the review as well. It is not good enough to be fully prepared to throw stones all around us without taking a good look at our glasshouse first. We must demonstrate to the people that we are prepared to make hard choices about our futures and positions and the perks and privileges that come with this place. We must show that, if necessary, we are prepared to make changes to the Assembly to streamline Government service. It should not be the case that everything else is changed while the Assembly, its 108 Members and all the Departments remain in a protected bubble. The House must consider the possibility of reducing the number of Members. I see no reason for such discussions not being included in the review. I say to the First and the Deputy First Ministers that the House should be included in the review. Members who have spoken so far have given a clear impression that that should happen.

The Belfast Agreement did not dictate the number of Departments. It provided for a maximum of 10 Departments. That does not mean that there have to be 10 Departments. Of course, Parkinson's law applies to politics as well, and inevitably we expanded to fill the available space, but we do not have to keep 10 Departments. It may be that we have the best structure and that, following other streamlining measures, we retain 10 Departments. However, let us consider whether that is the case as part of the review. We should not fall into the trap of accepting that number of Departments and addressing only the structures beneath them. We should look at the Departments as part of an all-encompassing review of administration, and it would not be right for the House to be protected from that. It may mean that some Members will have to make some tough decisions about themselves. It will be interesting to note how the 60% of Members who also serve on district councils will feel about voting their district councils out of existence.

Rev Dr William McCrea: We are not going to vote them out of existence.

Mr Dalton: That is interesting. I hope that if, as common sense will inevitably dictate, councils such as Castlereagh Borough Council are reduced and an expanded Belfast City Council introduced, the £14,000 that the family Robinson take out of the former will be gladly given up and that it will be happy to see that administration improved.

Rev Dr William McCrea: The Member will not be representing anybody after the election.

Mr Dalton: It is obvious that I have hit a nerve.

No date has been set for the completion of the review. The First and the Deputy First Ministers should seriously consider setting a target date. We should not allow this to be one of those reviews that drags on only to be followed by a further review and a consultation on that review, because, before we know it, we will have completed yet another Assembly term. We should ensure that the review is conducted in a relatively short time, so that we are in a position to take some action either at the end of this Assembly's lifetime or at the beginning of the next. I sincerely hope that I see that happen, whether I witness it from the Gallery or the Chamber.

Mr O'Neill: The SDLP welcomes the opportunity to comment on the terms of reference for the review. The outcome will have a lasting impact on the efficiency, accountability and overall shape of public service delivery in Northern Ireland. The subject of delay has already been mentioned — that delay might not have been so lengthy if all those responsible for implementing the agreement had done so when they were supposed to.

For many years the SDLP has expressed concern about the shape of government in the North with reference to structures and accountability generally and the operation of quangos in particular. I trust that we will take this opportunity to address those and other long-standing concerns about the inequality of service provision and the proportion of funds spent on administration rather than directly on services. In addition, this review must be linked closely with the review of local government accommodation, which has already been referred to, and examined with a view to decentralising public-sector employment opportunities.

Several major principles always spring to mind when addressing this issue. Among those that the SDLP considers to be at the heart of this work are the best possible delivery of services, equality of provision, appropriate structures and responsiveness. In other words, the SDLP would like to see the development of high-quality public services, a means of supporting economic and social development. That commitment goes beyond the philosophical conviction that every

citizen is entitled to a warm home, a good education and high-quality healthcare. It is also based on the practical recognition that resources deployed for public services play a vital role in generating economic stability and success, and, if properly managed they can be seen as an investment.

We are all concerned about funding and health, and there have been some suggestions about cutting other Departments' budgets to support health. However, the contributions of many Departments to health education combine to produce a better outcome — for example, in health and safety on our roads. The public service overall must be designed to work as a cohesive network rather than pull in different directions. Mechanisms for co-operation should be explored so that services are integrated and coherent. As many aspects of services are delivered by different bodies, the respective roles must be set out clearly — it should not be up to a citizen to arrange multiple meetings to clarify the extent of responsibility on each side. As representatives, I am sure that many Members have often experienced that sort of situation, which often results in a paper chase. They must also be flexible and adaptable, taking account of changing public needs.

Equality of service provision is a second principle in keeping with the TSN principles. Recent decades have seen many inequalities addressed, but the underlying structures that facilitate inequality of access to public services have not been tackled. It costs more to service, for example, rural areas, and some district councils are badly stretched because of that. The cost of service provision for the whole of the North is greater than that for similar areas with a less dispersed population spread, and that must be openly addressed and dealt with. The new obligations of Government require significant attention to be paid to the equality duty under section 75, human rights developments and targeting social need commitments.

2.15 pm

A further principle is democratic accountability. Public expenditure levels are an interesting indication, and it is remarkable that less than 5% of our public budget is spent by elected representatives on councils, while some 65% is currently spent by those appointed to unelected bodies. That comparison always startles and concerns me. Although we all recognise — as has been outlined already — that it is partly the result of the particular difficulties that the region has endured over recent decades, it has, nevertheless, raised anxiety about the level of public accountability for the delivery of public services. That is not to detract from the good work done by many people in such roles, but, like justice, public accountability must be seen.

A fourth principle, which has also been referred to by others, is value for money. Whether the resources

are scarce or plentiful, there is an onus on the Government to spend public money as efficiently as possible. Again, that is of particular significance, given the North's low population density and the relative scarcity of resources in comparison to the level of investment required to regenerate our economy and rebuild our public services. Questions arise about the level of duplication under current arrangements, inefficiencies resulting from inadequate co-operation or inappropriate structures and the cost of administration itself.

Take, for example, the simple, mundane matter of grass-cutting. In deference to the Member who has just spoken, I should declare an interest, as I am still a councillor. Those Members who have experience of working at local government level with other bodies and boards will know that grass-cutting is carried out by councils, education and library boards, health trusts and the Roads Service. Some of those bodies do it by contract, others by direct provision. Surely that is an awful waste. If this were packaged together, it could be delivered more effectively. There are quite a few other similar matters, such as building maintenance, that could be looked at in the administration review under value for money.

A further principle has to do with decisions being taken as close as possible to the people. Our party has always been strongly committed to local government, and we wholeheartedly endorse the principle of subsidiarity. Decisions should be taken as close to people as possible in a context of effectiveness and efficiency. We are the party of co-operation, and the SDLP is a long-standing advocate of European union. That is consistent with an approach based on co-operation and collectivity where appropriate, while acknowledging the wide variety of issues and services that are best dealt with at local level.

The final principle is that of cross-community concerns. The partnership principles at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement must be delivered upon at all levels in the public sector. The context that created a need for protections in this House also created a need for mechanisms to ensure confidence in decision-making at other levels. While the key principles and issues that I have identified should be pivotal to the operation of the review, the SDLP would also like to see specific attention being paid to sectoral issues in the various areas of public administration — education, health, et cetera. It might be useful to have an appendix to the terms of reference that listed the sectoral areas to be subject to examination. We could then see the issues in a sectoral fashion and see how best to cover them. That is a lengthy list, but it might be useful and important.

We congratulate OFMDFM on its decision that the Assembly and the Executive should be central to the process. Some were concerned about the meaning of "we" — it is the Assembly and the Executive, with a

strong, independent element, to guide us throughout. That is an innovative approach to an elaborate process, which will include what is inevitably important: political input based on good, sound, independent advice, help, support and direction.

We welcome the launch of the review and want to see incorporated some of the points that my Colleagues and I have made.

Mr Speaker: Mr Peter Robinson was named by a Member earlier in the debate and has requested the right to respond to the comments that were made about him.

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful for the courtesy that you have shown me, Mr Speaker, in allowing me to respond to Mr Dalton's remarks.

In any democratic institution there are conventions and procedures that require a Member, if he intends to make a personal attack on another Member, to inform that person beforehand, so that he or she can be present. That convention was not extended to me, so I respond now, having heard about Mr Dalton's comments from others.

I met with advisers this morning, with a view to taking legal action against the Belfast 'News Letter' and Mr Kane, who wrote last Saturday's article, because it contained many inaccuracies and clear defamation. With regard to my opposition to the Belfast Agreement, every decision that I take in my political life is based on the principles that I stand for, and there will never be any reflection on those principles from any remuneration that may result from a decision.

The article and Mr Dalton's comments are inaccurate because I get no pecuniary benefits from the Assembly. It is well known publicly — at least to those who want to listen — that my ministerial salary goes to my party. Those who are aware of my position in East Belfast know that the one third of my Assembly salary to which I am entitled is used to provide a first-class service in my constituency. Although Members of Mr Dalton's party have no full-time advice centre in East Belfast, the DUP has two advice centres there, thanks to the remuneration that does not go into my pocket, but which funds the work in East Belfast. The article in the Belfast 'News Letter', to which Mr Dalton referred, suggested that my family received around £181,000 — absolute nonsense. The Assembly does not pay my two sons, so his argument falls yet again. I get no benefit from the Assembly, so I would like to see how they can make up that figure.

It is worth pointing out that the person who is best paid in the Assembly is the Member's mentor, the First Minister, Mr Trimble. Not only does he get, and keep, more money than any other Minister in Northern Ireland, even when he gets peace prize money, he keeps

it, while John Hume hands his money over to support good causes. Therefore, it ill becomes the Member—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is in order for me to point out that the Member did refer earlier to how Members should deal with other Members. I simply draw that to his attention without further comment.

Mr P Robinson: If I get to a personal attack on Mr Trimble, I can assure you, Mr Speaker, that he will know it.

Reference was also made to Castlereagh Borough Council. No area in Northern Ireland has benefited more from the policies that have been pursued by my colleagues there and me. The net value to Castlereagh Borough Council can be seen in its rates bills every year. No cheap and nasty politics from Mr Dalton will dent the council's continued faith in the policies that I have pursued in that area.

In the short time that I have used up, I have attempted to show that the remarks made in the 'News Letter', and repeated in the House today, are a total fabrication. They are the work of the dirty tricks department at Glengall Street, and they will be judged as such by the general public. Even at this stage, I am willing to give way if the Member wants to stand over any of the comments that he has made, but I see that he is making no move to do so. That simply shows the utter discredit of any remarks that he has made.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Francie Molloy. Mr Molloy will have to bear with an interruption for Question Time, but there is no reason for his not continuing afterwards, if he needs the time.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish to make my contribution in two parts. First, I will speak as the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and afterwards as a private Member.

On behalf of the Committee, I welcome the opportunity to debate the review of public administration. The Committee is glad that the review is being initiated as outlined in the Programme for Government, and it is supportive of the need to consider all aspects of the public service to ensure that services are delivered in the most effective, efficient and economical way. The Committee also endorses the approach taken to ensure that the views of MLAs, Committees and other interested bodies are sought before the terms of reference are confirmed. However, we do need to move on.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClelland] in the Chair)

In any review of this magnitude, the terms of reference are important to ensure that the exercise considers the wide remit and is not restricted in the options for reform that will be considered in the future. A fine

balance must, therefore, be struck between being too specific or too general in the terms of reference.

On a general point, the scope of the review as it currently reads is extensive and will generate a large amount of work, which is likely to be contentious in many parts. A clear plan is needed to manage and deliver the programme of activity involved. The Committee is concerned to ensure that representatives from the Departments and the Committees are involved in all stages of the process.

The Committee believes that the review of public administration should commence, but it is also aware that the accommodation review and many other reviews are ongoing. Members are keen to see the accommodation review being moved forward, but it should not prejudice or prejudice the outcome of the review of public administration. The Department of Finance and Personnel is responsible for several Next Steps agencies, some of which are undergoing reviews and examining options for their future status. The Committee would like some consideration to be given to immediate and short-term activity on the agencies' status, which might be connected directly to the review of public administration.

The terms of reference show that this could be costly. The Committee believes that the costs of the exercise and any implementation plans should be made known to the Assembly, and the Assembly should be able to respond to them.

I want to distance my next comments from my position as Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. Speaking as a Member for Mid Ulster and west of the Bann, I want to restate the need for an urgent review and rebalancing of the services of local government, Government jobs, economic development and structures across the different levels of administration. There is a need to see this review in terms of the Hayes review, the Burns review, the review of Civil Service jobs and the reallocation of jobs. To achieve greater democracy and accountability, we must ensure that power is located in local government. If that is going to happen, and if we are going to see more powers —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Molloy, I regret having to stop you in midstream. You will have the opportunity to speak again later.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

Fujitsu Funding

1. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much of the funding promised to Fujitsu, in letters of offer in 1994 and 1996, totalling £1.7 million and £2.9 million for its Springvale site project, was taken up by the company. (AQO 902/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): As Fujitsu and Trivirex are currently negotiating a takeover of the Springvale factory, it would be prejudicial to future employment prospects on the site if I were to make public the amounts of grants paid. Those matters are commercially sensitive at this time.

Mr Maskey: I appreciate the sensitivities. Given that response from the Minister, he may not be able to answer my supplementary question either. Is there any need for clawback on any moneys that have been awarded or offered to the company?

Sir Reg Empey: That is an understandable question. However, the commercial arrangements between the companies are still being negotiated, and those aspects are sensitive. I understand that Fujitsu could agree to continue to place levels of manufacturing with the Springvale facility to ensure its continued operation, so that there would be no redundancies until the new owners can progressively transfer in their own work.

There are a variety of possible combinations of events, and we are conscious of clawback issues arising in those situations. The question of what assets remain — plant, machinery, and so on — is still under determination. Due diligence is under way, and it will be a few weeks yet before we know the final outcome.

Despite my regret at the Fujitsu decision, the outcome may not be negative for the Springvale site. I regret that I am unable to give the Member a fuller response at this stage, and I hope he understands the sensitivities of ongoing negotiations.

Promotion of Northern Ireland

2. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps have been taken to

promote Northern Ireland as an investment location in Europe. (AQO 898/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In January 2001, Mr David Trimble, Mr Séamus Mallon and myself launched IDB's European marketing campaign at events in Paris, Düsseldorf and Berlin. The objective was to raise the profile of Northern Ireland as an attractive location for investment. Despite the global economic downturn, IDB continues to build on contacts made then and has appointed a new sales representative in Brussels.

Mr Poots: I was aware of the launch; that is why I asked the question. What opportunities have been developed for local companies to create linkages with other similar businesses in Europe to improve efficiency, development and marketing opportunities?

Sir Reg Empey: In addition to our office in Düsseldorf, we have a representative based in Brussels who looks after the Low Countries and also has a role in France. We have an office in the British Embassy in Paris that we can use from time to time to promote events. The European market is crucial, and inward investors to Northern Ireland are frequently attracted on the basis that we are part of the European Union, with access to that huge market.

There are opportunities. However, while we have had some successes in software in the last year or so in Germany, the currency issue is a difficulty.

We do not have to give up because the current climate is negative. We must put in the groundwork to ensure that we continue to get a flow of inward investment. On a positive note, Trade International, the international trading arm of IDB, continues to lead missions and attend exhibitions in Europe. Those have been successful, well attended and supported by the business community, and we consider Europe to be one of our main areas for economic activity for the future.

Consultation Documents – Cost

3. **Mr Close** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the cost of producing documents for consultation in the past three years, including preparation, printing, distribution and all ancillary costs. (AQO 882/01)

Sir Reg Empey: As the Member's question requires a considerable co-ordination exercise across my Department and its agencies, I am not yet in a position to provide the information that he seeks. I shall, therefore, with the Member's forbearance, provide the information by way of a written answer.

Mr Close: I accept the Minister's reply. I am pleased that he has given the question the care and consideration that it requires. As he is taking more time and will be replying in writing, will he also give consideration

to any cost benefit analysis on the expenditure of the money? Will he also make it clear that the money thus spent is used, in his view, more beneficially than, for example, the expenditure on hip replacements or coronary care?

Sir Reg Empey: I understand and have listened carefully to the views of several Members in recent weeks about the costs and time involved in consultation exercises. Some of them are subject to statutory requirement. I share the frustration of some Members. We may have got the balance wrong somewhat, but the Member will be the first to acknowledge that we come from an era in which consultation meant nothing. It was a play-acting exercise, where councillors would be asked what they thought, knowing that the legislation was already written. There was a façade of consultation under direct rule. Therefore, I suppose that there is a natural reaction to that. If the Member has been on planning committees he will know what I mean — they were a joke. However, the fact remains that people are entitled to be consulted on matters that affect them, regardless of the legalities. As citizens, they are entitled to have a view and an input. What remains to be seen is whether we have tipped the balance too much the other way.

I think that we have, but I am sure that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is looking at those matters, and I have no doubt that Members of the House will return to the issue. I apologise to the Member for being unable to give him precise figures, but I could not guarantee their accuracy if I were to give them to him today. I hope that when we have received responses from our different agencies I shall be able to provide him with accurate information.

Sperrins – Tourism Strategy

4. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his strategy for developing the tourism potential of the Sperrins; and to make a statement. (AQO 864/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Sperrins Tourism Ltd is a partnership of tourism interests that represents all sectors. It plays a co-ordinating role and is committed to maximising the natural resources of the unspoilt environment, including that in the Sperrins. In 2001-02, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board provided the company with funding for marketing activity to promote tourism and production in the area.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that the Sperrins' potential is as yet unrealised? The area is relatively undiscovered and is a superb

area for fishing, walking, cycling and cultural activities. Will the Minister work with Mr McGimpsey and Dr Jim McDaid TD to look at how the cultural heritage of Glencolumbkille in Donegal has been marketed for tourism purposes, and reflect that in the Glenelly valley, especially in the western Sperrins, where the Irish language was spoken until the 1950s?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member has raised some matters, which, as he conceded, are not relevant to my Department. However, I am conscious of the Sperrins' potential. Since 1989, the Sperrins area has received approximately £7 million from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. That amount has come in the form of financial assistance towards capital infrastructure and support for marketing activities. As the Member rightly says, the Sperrins have a fantastic product to offer for angling, walking and cycling. If the Member is suggesting the development of cultural tourism, he will find a receptive ear in my Department. Cultural tourism is developing across Europe, and Northern Ireland with its historical and cultural events is uniquely placed to benefit from that.

I am in regular contact with Dr McDaid. We work closely together with regard to Tourism Ireland and marketing. Cultural tourism has resonance with some of the markets that we wish to attract. I will ensure that officials draw that matter to the attention of my Colleague Mr McGimpsey, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Mr McMenamin: Last year was a disaster for all aspects of tourism, and the forecast for 2002-03 is not much more hopeful. Does the Minister agree that there is a need for public funding to sustain the tourist infrastructure in the Sperrins and to publicise the region much more aggressively?

Sir Reg Empey: The truth is that one can never market any region enough. However, local authorities and the regional tourism organisation, which is funded by the Tourist Board, are very proactive. Recently, a new hotel opened in Maghera. That has been a major boost to that area, which was hard hit last year by foot-and-mouth disease. Rural-based and natural-resource-based tourism products such as walking and cycling were banned for months. It has taken a long time to recover, but I am thankful that that plague is behind us. I do not dispute the Member's main point that much damage was done, that people lost revenue, that that has held back investment and that, as a result, some businesses have been struggling to survive. However, there is strong partnership in the area — Magherafelt District Council was deeply involved. I visited the area and spoke to the people involved, and I did not detect any tailing off of enthusiasm among those who were most directly affected. They know that they have a good product, which, if marketed successfully, will ultimately bring economic regeneration into the area.

Tourist Board – Audit Report

5. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when the accounting officer of his Department will be in a position to publish the most recent audit report on the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. (AQO 885/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department signed off the report on 13 December 2001. Subsequently, the Northern Ireland Audit Office received comments from other parties and, in the light of further revisions to the text, correctly invited the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to reconsider the draft in January and again on 6 February. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board responded finally to the issues on 14 February 2002.

Mr Dallat: I fully understand the importance of having accurate facts in the Northern Ireland Audit Office reports, but the Minister will understand — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Dallat: My constituency of East Londonderry has a high dependency on tourism. I have a particular interest in the Tourist Board and how it functions. Will the Minister confirm that whatever action is needed as a result of the Audit Office report, which is published tomorrow, will be taken immediately? Members must have confidence that taxpayers' money is being properly controlled in the Tourist Board and used efficiently for the promotion of tourism.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member should not assume that I wait for a report before I take action. Many of the issues raised in the report — which are serious, and which I take seriously — were identified by the Tourist Board itself. Many were identified by our own internal audit procedures before the Audit Office became involved. In many cases action was taken some time ago.

However, that does not relieve us of the obligation to be continuously vigilant. To an extent, I am restricted in the response that I can make to the Member. It is appropriate for the hearing to take place first, as I may be called upon to make further statements at that stage, and I believe that those are better made to the House initially, rather than to the media.

2.45 pm

Mr Kennedy: Does the Minister view it as somewhat odd, and as a matter of grave concern, that, despite being personally cleared by the Audit Office, the chairman of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board continues to be the subject of a political witch-hunt led by leading members of the SDLP?

Sir Reg Empey: I have great sympathy for the chairman of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. When Mr Bailie was appointed to the post by my Department

some years ago, it was well known that he was a supplier of printed materials to the board. If I understand it correctly, the amount of business that he did with the board was greater prior to his appointment as chairman than subsequent to it, and I made that point to the Assembly when the issue first arose last year.

It is also important to note that the Comptroller and Auditor General, Mr Dowdall, has accepted that the chairman did not influence contracts, and he also made it clear that he believes that it is important to make the point that W&G Baird Ltd was not the only company to benefit from poor procedures within the Tourist Board. When making his initial comments, Mr Dowdall indicated that he accepted the assurance of my Department that the chairman acted entirely properly in all matters in relation to Northern Ireland Tourist Board procurement decisions. It has, therefore, been a matter of regret to me that the chairman has been singled out and has had to defend himself against allegations that were not true.

Clearly there have been procedural failures, and there is no doubt of that. If any matter is drawn to my attention that requires action to be taken to ensure that taxpayers' money is properly and adequately spent and accounted for, I will not be slow to take those actions. My Department has been told, from the top down, that I expect this matter to be resolved satisfactorily, so the Member can be assured of that. However, it is important to make the point that the individual concerned, who has been caught in the crossfire, should not be personally pilloried or have his reputation damaged. I am not in possession of any information that would lead me to the conclusion that he was culpable, and the auditor has clearly exonerated him in reports that have been drawn to my attention.

Mr Shannon: The Minister has stated that the Northern Ireland Audit Office is making an announcement in relation to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Is the Minister aware of a television programme to be screened tonight that will specifically feature the audit report? What input has the Minister had, if any, to that programme?

Sir Reg Empey: I am aware that a programme will be screened tomorrow night. It has been in preparation for some weeks, and I was invited to appear on it. However, due to the difficulties and restrictions of protocol in the handling of Public Accounts Committee reports, I have been unable to appear on the programme. I have, however, issued a statement, and I understand that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is doing the same. The Member will forgive me if I am not able to respond as fully as I would like, but I have to restrain myself until such times as the Assembly deals with the report. A formal hearing is to take place in May in front of the Public Accounts Committee, and I will

have the opportunity, subsequent to that, to make my position clear. However, I believe the facts, as the Member states them, are correct.

Design and Manufacturing Capability

6. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 645/01, to clarify (a) the number of employees needed to constitute a strong design and manufacturing capability; and (b) to give a commitment to retain this workforce.
(AQO 865/01)

Sir Reg Empey: It is a matter for the company to judge what it needs in design and manufacturing capability in order to compete effectively for aircraft projects. I am not in a position to give a commitment that jobs will be retained. I have, however, received assurances that Bombardier is committed to retaining a strong design and engineering capability in Belfast. IDB will ensure that that is taken into account when negotiating packages of selective financial assistance.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Minister confirm that, as technology improves and business practices become more efficient, the size of the design team employed by Bombardier Shorts in Northern Ireland may decrease, and that future reduction in the numbers of those employed in the design and engineering sector of the company will not necessarily reflect a desire to wind up those interests in Northern Ireland?

Sir Reg Empey: I am conscious of Mrs Robinson's interest in the matter. She is not alone; I have had representations from trade unions, other elected representatives and local authorities.

It is clear that technology makes a difference to design. When I visited the headquarters of Bombardier in Montreal before Christmas, I drew the senior management's attention to my concern that adequate facilities should exist in Belfast to deal with the design and engineering capability. IDB believes, as do I, that having the capacity to tender and design the product within the group is a critical issue to obtaining future work. I know that the trade unions are very concerned. My understanding is that there are no future plans to reduce that capacity in the company, and I can assure the Member that when I meet with management, locally or internationally, the point is emphasised at every opportunity.

I can also assure the Member that in any of its negotiations with regard to future packages, IDB is taking the situation into account. IDB is continuously emphasising to the company that if it became clear to us that any withdrawal or significant reduction in capability were to take place, that would colour its judgement as to any future financial assistance it would be prepared to offer.

Dr McDonnell: In general terms, does the Minister agree that a full economic recovery will take place only if it is grounded in the knowledge-based economy? In that area, our spend is less than half that of the UK.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The supplementary must be based on the question in the Order Paper. It is unclear as to how the Member's question is related to question 6.

Dr McDonnell: The question is related to design and manufacturing R&D spend.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You may proceed.

Dr McDonnell: What initiatives does the Minister plan to take to bring R&D spend, whether private or public, up to UK levels?

Sir Reg Empey: I am aware of the difference between our R&D spend and that of our competitors. The Member will be aware that there is a commitment in the Programme for Government on that subject. My Colleague, the Minister for Employment and Learning, her predecessor and myself have been working hard on the matter. Before Christmas we had meetings with the vice chancellors of the universities. We have had ongoing dialogue with other Government Departments where there is a significant public-sector R&D involvement.

One of our industrial development policies is to identify companies without an R&D capability and to encourage them. We are trying to encourage inward investors, as well as indigenous investors who are reinvesting, to go for an R&D capability. We are skewing our financial assistance in favour of those companies, as there is greater potential for the stability and longevity of an enterprise here if it has a significant R&D commitment.

The Member knows that only too well. I take the issue seriously, and my Department tries to configure its expenditure in that way. The Executive Members are working together at departmental level to ensure that we increase the figures to a reasonable level in compliance with the commitments made in the Programme for Government.

Development of Tourist Facilities

7. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what financial resources will be invested in the development of tourist facilities; and to make a statement. (AQO 868/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department and its agencies administer several programmes for the development of tourist facilities. Over the next three years approximately £18 million should be available under the tourism development scheme, the EU Peace II programme and the International Fund for Ireland (IFI).

Mr McGrady: The Minister referred to £18 million of funding coming from Europe to the Northern

Ireland Tourist Board, which should be added to the £57 million of European funding that has been allocated to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Can the Minister tell us what criteria will be used to allocate those funds to individual projects? More importantly, will he consider seriously the necessity to revitalise and regenerate many of our tourist centre attractions? I am plugging some of the most sensitive and beautiful areas around Newcastle, Killeel and Warrenpoint, which, together with many other areas in the Six Counties, have not had the revitalisation of tourist infrastructure that they need.

Sir Reg Empey: I thought that I might receive a question from that direction, so I asked my officials to prepare a note on that topic, and an interesting statistic emerged. A total of just over £109.5 million of financial assistance has been offered to tourist accommodation and amenity projects throughout Northern Ireland in the past 10 years. The South Down constituency has received the second largest proportion of financial assistance, which represents 13.8% of the total grant offered in that 10-year period. The Member must concede that his area is not exactly deprived in that regard. However, I take the wider point seriously. Tourism is receiving some assistance from the European Union, the IFI and our own recourses. To that cocktail of funding we can add the contributions from the local authorities and the tourist industry.

The tourist board and the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee are carrying out reviews, as the Member will be aware, because they recognise that, from time to time, they must decide where the emphasis lies. The Member also said that regeneration is required. One scheme is under way at present to examine guest house provision and accommodation standards. A debate is raging in the Newcastle area about having a major amenity as a gateway to the Mourne. These are all significant measures. However, the Member must agree that the biggest boost we can give to tourism in Northern Ireland is the removal of the sort of scenes that appear constantly on television screens — nationally and internationally — which drive people away.

I have told the House many times that the tourism industry is operating at one third of its potential. That is a crying shame. There is huge potential for jobs and, given that agriculture will be under pressure for the next few years, the rural community and natural-resource-based tourism will be able to take advantage of a wonderful opportunity. That will happen only if the opportunity can be provided.

Jobs in Strabane and Omagh District Council Areas

9. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total jobs lost and

total jobs created in the Strabane and Omagh District Council areas over the last three years. (AQO 879/01)

Sir Reg Empey: It is not currently possible to provide information on redundancies for district council areas. However, over the past three years, 193 redundancies were confirmed to the Department in the Strabane job-centre area and 217 in the Omagh job-centre area. Information on the number of jobs created is not available. However, figures from the NI census of employment can be used to estimate the net change in employee jobs between censuses. Latest figures show that between 1997 and 1999 the number of employee jobs in the Strabane and Omagh district council areas increased by 90 and 786 respectively.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Hussey may ask a supplementary question, but I suspect that he will receive a written answer.

3.00 pm

Mr Hussey: I understand the constraints of time. The Programme for Government shows that growth is constrained by the structure of the economy. It highlights declining sectors such as textiles. The Minister realises the difficulties that exist in west Tyrone, which comprises the two district council areas of Strabane and Omagh. Given those concerns, can the Minister assure the House that the employment figures for west Tyrone will at least reach the Northern Ireland average?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister will supply a written response to the question. Time is up for questions to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. There will now be questions to the Minister for Employment and Learning. I wish to advise Members that question 4, in the name of Mrs Nelis, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

FE Colleges – Remission of Fees

1. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether further education colleges have had their fees remitted as a result of the support package initiated by her Department last year.

(AQO 893/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): Tuition fees for full-time students aged 19 and over who are attending vocational courses in colleges of further education were abolished with effect from 1 August 2001. Guidance to colleges about student eligibility and details about the funding available were issued in a departmental circular on 26 July 2001.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Minister inform the House what the eligibility requirements for the remission of fees are?

Ms Hanna: Colleges should remit fees for full-time students who are aged 19 or over on 1 July before that academic year and who are undertaking a vocational programme of study at national vocational qualification (NVQ) level three or below and who meet the European residency criteria. Purely academic programmes of study at that level, such as GCSEs and A levels and programmes at level four and above, are excluded.

Dr Birnie: Given that several further education colleges have severe financial problems and deficits, what is the Department's view of colleges that may raise fees for various short courses to raise funds to redress deficits?

Ms Hanna: The Department pays colleges a maximum of £840 per annum for each full-time student enrolled after 1 August 2001 who meets the eligibility criteria. That sum is based on the average amount received by each college before the introduction of the fees remission policy.

Capital Investment Programmes

2. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what capital investment programmes are planned by her Department. (AQO 888/01)

Ms Hanna: In 2002-03, capital funding of £21 million will be invested in the further education sector. That funding will be targeted primarily at major works, health and safety maintenance, access for disabled students and capital equipment — including funding for information and communications technology equipment and centres of excellence.

Regarding higher education, the Department's planned capital budget for 2002-03 is £9.4 million. That will be used for various projects, including enhancing infrastructure and facilitating compliance with forthcoming disability legislation. In addition, 2002-03 will see the first tranche of grants under the Science Research Investment Fund programme. That aims specifically at strengthening science research, and grants of £7 million will be available in 2002-04.

Mr Fee: It is very welcome to have the assurance that some £37 million will be spent on the capital investment programme. Can the Minister give more precise details about which schemes will be introduced for funding in the further education sector?

Ms Hanna: I am examining the capital programme for the coming year. The Department for Employment and Learning is making progress with several private finance initiative schemes to provide brand new build accommodation at Omagh College of Further Education

and East Tyrone College of Further and Higher Education and a new campus for the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education. There is also a partnership between the Belfast Institute and the University of Ulster to provide brand new accommodation at Springvale in west Belfast.

Mr Hamilton: Does the Minister agree that one of the most urgent capital requirements relates to the Henry Garrett Building at Stranmillis University College? Part of the building was recently closed on health and safety grounds. The teachers of the future surely deserve better training facilities.

Ms Hanna: I agree that there are financial issues with the Henry Garrett Building, which I visited some weeks ago. The Member is probably aware that they are being addressed, and I can give him more details in writing.

Student Poverty

3. **Mr O'Neill** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what financial support is in place to address student poverty. (AQO 890/01)

Ms Hanna: Grants are being reintroduced in higher education from September 2002, targeted specifically at students from low-income backgrounds. Households with incomes of less than £15,000 are eligible for grants of up to £1,500. Childcare grants have been in place from 1 September 2001. The level of parental income at which a contribution towards tuition fees becomes due has also been increased. Student loans, which, as the Member knows, are highly subsidised from public funds, are also available.

In further education, fees for full-time students over 19 years of age on vocational courses have been abolished. A system of discretionary grants was introduced in September 2001. Students who experience particular financial difficulties during their studies can also avail of access and hardship funds in further and higher education.

Mr O'Neill: Can the Minister outline any further ideas or steps that she may have in mind to address the problem of fees, given its importance? How much would it cost to abolish fees?

Ms Hanna: My officials have calculated that the abolition of fees across higher and further education, both full-time and part-time, could cost up to an additional £35 million per year. The Department must ensure that the money it has reaches the areas where it is needed most. This year, £116 million has been spent on student support. Next year, that figure will rise to £133 million. In addition to that, there is £65 million from Seán Farren's support scheme.

A considerable amount of money is being spent. The threshold at which student fees are paid has been raised. Currently, over half the students in higher education do not pay fees, one quarter pay 50% of fees and only the remaining quarter pay the full amount. The income threshold for the payment of fees has been raised to £20,000 per household. The threshold at which student grants are available has also been raised.

Mr Beggs: Do the high levels of student debt deter potential students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, from entering higher and further education? The number of Unionist students from low-income backgrounds entering further education is particularly low. Is that related to a lack of information about grants that may be available?

Ms Hanna: Recent evidence from Market and Opinion Research International (MORI) suggests that we are better at attracting and retaining students from lower-income backgrounds than is the case across the water. I do not have the figures to hand on the community background of students, but if they are available, I will supply them to the Member.

Decentralisation of Jobs

5. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the number of personnel currently employed in her Department; and (b) how many of these jobs may be decentralised between January and December 2002. (AQO 895/01)

Ms Hanna: The Department for Employment and Learning currently employs 1,512 staff, of whom 602 are employed outside Belfast. There are no plans for further decentralisation. However, the Executive have commissioned Deloitte & Touche to carry out a review of Northern Ireland Civil Service accommodation.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the moves afoot to examine the problem at least. Why must so many jobs be located in Belfast, and why is it not possible to proceed with decentralisation?

Ms Hanna: Decentralisation is under review. There are obvious advantages in locating headquarters close to Stormont and in having ready access to senior civil servants. However, it is necessary to examine more closely the possibility of locating our services beyond Belfast. The extra costs and time involved when staff travel from other areas, including car parking and other factors, must be taken on board. My Department has JobCentres throughout Northern Ireland, but there may be the potential to build on that.

Evaluation of New Deal

6. **Mr Maginness** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what the main findings of the

evaluation of the New Deal published in January 2002 are. (AQO 894/01)

Ms Hanna: The evaluation was generally positive. It found that New Deal worked well with motivated participants and with those who had positive experiences of the labour market. Many instances of good practice were found. The role of the New Deal personal advisor emerged as a significant factor in the successful delivery of the programme. The programme was less effective in dealing with those who face multiple barriers to employment, and my Department is working to rectify that.

Mr A Maginness: I am gratified that the evaluation found that New Deal worked reasonably well. Where is there room for improvement in the delivery of the programme and what measures could the Minister's Department take to make those improvements?

Ms Hanna: Although the evaluation was generally positive, it showed that there is room for improvement, particularly when dealing with participants with multiple barriers to employment. My Department is reviewing how best to tailor that provision to meet the needs of those groups. In addition, the evaluation highlighted the need for refresher training for personal advisors, and a comprehensive programme for their training commenced recently.

FE Boards of Governors

7. **Mr A Doherty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many applications have been received for further education boards of governors positions. (AQO 892/01)

Ms Hanna: Three hundred and seventeen applications were received.

Mr A Doherty: I thank the Minister for that concise answer. Why was it necessary to advertise twice for applications for positions on the boards?

Ms Hanna: Advertisements were placed in local papers twice to gain the number of applications that were needed for particular colleges. The Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 specifies that governors must be drawn from certain backgrounds. There were insufficient responses to the first advertisement from those with the appropriate backgrounds, particularly from the business sector.

Mr McFarland: Given that governors are ultimately responsible for overseeing the finances of colleges, how adequate are the financial management skills and training of governors? What is the Minister's Department doing to address any shortcomings?

Ms Hanna: In the last few years, further education colleges took over their management from the education and library boards. Some are managing better than

others. That is why the criteria for governors are so important. A board of governors must comprise members with specific backgrounds, particularly from business and other professions, members from the further education college itself and a representative of the student body. The board requires members who have that expertise.

3.15 pm

Mr Douglas: What steps has the Department taken to ensure that boards of governors are representative of the religious balance of catchment areas?

Ms Hanna: I am sure that the Department deals with that, but I do not have the answer here. I will respond to the Member in writing.

Springvale Outreach Centre

8. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what strategy the Springvale Outreach Centre will employ to ensure wider access by the community in west Belfast to courses at the proposed Springvale University. (AQO 901/01)

Ms Hanna: I believe in the principles of regeneration, reconciliation and education for local people, which are the principles of the Springvale Outreach Centre. Education for local people is widening access to education. It is for local partners to ensure that the strategy fits with these principles, and I will meet with them to offer all the help and support that I can.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Minister for her reply. I raised the issue with her predecessor, Dr Farren. I know that the Minister cannot commit herself to a date for a meeting today. However, given the need for Springvale to be a centre of excellence for education, the importance of regeneration for that area and the huge amount of public money that goes to it, can the Minister assure the House that, when she meets the area's social partners, she will seek to provide some of them with resources?

As the local partnerships span west Belfast, the Shankill and north Belfast, it has been difficult to ensure that they are resourced and will benefit the community in the final analysis — an issue that we have raised with the Department.

Ms Hanna: I am aware of some of those problems, and I will do my best to ensure that all the partners are kept informed and on board.

Mr K Robinson: Recent research commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister illustrated the extent of non-progression to further and higher education, particularly among Protestant working-class males. What will be done in the light of that to ensure that Springvale will actively

seek the involvement of that marginalised and volatile sector of our society?

Ms Hanna: If Springvale is to be a centre of excellence — and it must be no less than that — it is essential that it is outward looking and involves the wider community, including the Shankill.

Training in the Construction Industry

9. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures have been put in place to encourage more young people to take up training in the construction industry. (AQO 899/01)

Ms Hanna: Responsibility for encouraging young people to take up training in the construction industry rests with the Construction Industry Training Board (Northern Ireland) (CITB), which is the only remaining statutory training board in Northern Ireland. Its remit is defined under the relevant legislation as the encouragement of adequate training of persons employed or intending to be employed in the industry. The Department facilitates the industry through the work of the careers service and provides funding for trainees and apprentices in the sector through Jobskills, Focus for Work and New Deal.

Mr Poots: I thank the Minister for her response. Does the Department recognise that the number of young people who take up such trades has decreased? Does it recognise that those trades are essential to the future well-being of Northern Ireland? Does the Department intend to develop a programme that will encourage more young people to take up traditional building trades?

Ms Hanna: Employment levels in the construction industry have grown constantly in the last few years, and the effect of growth in the industry in the South has caused a tight labour market. The Member is right — it is more difficult now to encourage young people to take up these trades. In the last full year, staff from the CITB made a total of 478 school visits. Since 1995, the board has invested £50,000 per annum of its levy in careers promotion. Activities have included job sampling across a wide range of construction skills, careers publications that explain the opportunities on offer and attendance at events such as school open days. I agree that we must do all that we can to encourage young people to learn those skills.

FE Students – Financial Support

10. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what financial support exists for students at further education colleges. (AQO 886/01)

Ms Hanna: The main support that is available includes the remission of tuition fees for full-time students, aged 19 years and above, on vocational further education courses; discretionary access bursaries for full-time further and higher education students, aged 19 years and above; and support funds for part-time and full-time students, aged 19 and above, whose access to or participation in further education is inhibited by financial considerations. In addition, higher education students have access to student loans.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the change in provision for that category of students in the past year or two. What help is available for further education students who suffer financial hardship? Are there any plans to increase such help?

Ms Hanna: Support funds are earmarked funds for further education colleges to provide financial help to students whose access to or participation in further education is inhibited by financial considerations or to those who, for whatever reason, including physical or other disability, face financial difficulties in meeting their living costs. The available funding has increased significantly in recent years. For example, new money was made available following the abolition of full-time tuition fees to compensate colleges for their subsequent loss of income. The support fund budgets, which assist students who face financial hardship, have increased significantly from £665,000 in 1998-99 to £1.6 million in 2001-02. The residual threshold at which a tuition contribution becomes due for higher education has been raised to £20,000.

Walsh Visas

11. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if Walsh visas remain available to those seeking work-related training in the United States of America. (AQO 876/01)

Ms Hanna: The US legislation will provide visas under the Walsh visa programme until September 2002. My Department continues to promote the programme and to recruit participants. Some 30 young people are currently engaged in pre-departure training. They are due to travel to the United States on 3 March 2002.

Mr Bradley: A short time remains for those who wish to take up the programme. Is the Minister satisfied with the progress of the Walsh programme so far?

Ms Hanna: Following the start-up phase, recruitment, selection, pre-departure training and US hub management have been strengthened significantly. Those measures have ensured that participants are better prepared and better supported to meet the challenge of living and working in the United States. They will also be better prepared for their return to Northern Ireland.

Learndirect

12. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail when the learndirect network will be extended to all district council areas.

(AQO 877/01)

Ms Hanna: The University for Industry Ltd has approved the proposals for a learndirect centre in all district council areas, with the exception for now of that of Larne Borough Council. A total of 31 centres, including one in Omagh, are operating already. A further three will be opened in the near future.

Mr Hussey: I am reflecting on the shock expressed by those to my left.

I appreciate the Minister's answer. However, she should note the concern at the length of time that it has taken the learndirect network to become fully operational. That is of particular concern in an area such as Strabane. A learndirect centre would greatly assist the rejuvenation of the area. I declare an interest as a member of Strabane District Council.

Is the Minister aware of any reasons for the North West Institute of Higher and Further Education's not being awarded a learndirect contract in Strabane?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The question deviates slightly from the topic of discussion. Does the Minister wish to answer?

Ms Hanna: I will do my best. The essential feature of learndirect is that its courses and support from tutors are available on the Internet, and the University for Industry encourages its centres to co-operate with community-based partners to provide outreach access points — for example, in workplaces and local community facilities. If that has not yet been done, Omagh could spread that out. However, I honestly do not know why learndirect has not reached Strabane. I will get back to the Member on that.

Consultation Documents - Cost

13. **Mr Close** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the cost of producing documents for consultation over the last three years, including preparation, printing, distribution and all ancillary costs.

(AQO 889/01)

Ms Hanna: Every effort is made to minimise printing and distribution costs through the production of consultation documents in-house and, where possible, through the use of e-mail. It is a matter of finding a balance between transparency and openness and not getting caught up in bureaucracy. The Member will be aware that my officials are working to provide details of costs where available, and I will write to him on that.

Mr Close: I thank the Minister for the promise of a comprehensive reply, and she is correct, I was already aware of that fact. Can the Minister also take into consideration the cost benefit analysis that was carried out on that expenditure? Does she further agree that the money could perhaps have been better spent on hip replacements, coronary care, day-care surgeries and so on?

Ms Hanna: As I have already said, it is a matter of finding a balance between transparency and openness and not getting caught up in bureaucracy.

Task Force Targets

15. **Mr McMenamin** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the main targets of the task force on employability and the long-term unemployed.

(AQO 896/01)

Ms Hanna: The task force targets are set out in its terms of reference. Those targets are: to research the factors affecting people out of work; to engage with others outside the Government; to make recommendations; and to prepare an action plan that integrates action across Departments and agencies. The first two stages have been completed, and we are now engaged in the final two stages — setting short-, medium- and long-term targets.

Mr McMenamin: How will the Minister measure the success or otherwise of the task force?

Ms Hanna: We must set targets to create employment in deprived areas, to improve training and reskilling, to remove the obstacles to work and to give more support when people first enter employment.

Tourism Training Levels

16. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give her assessment of training levels within the tourism industry; and to make a statement.

(AQO 869/01)

Ms Hanna: The Executive have recognised the potential contribution of tourism to the Northern Ireland economy. My Department has been working with the industry and, through the Tourism Training Trust, has helped to establish a training strategy for the sector. In addition to young people training for the industry through modern apprenticeships, Jobskills and further and higher education provision, several training initiatives have been put in place. The Northern Ireland skills task force has recently commissioned research to assess the demand and supply of skills for tourism.

Mr McGrady: Are there specific trainee programmes dealing with the broader spectrum of tourism, particularly tourist activity and the hospitality aspect of tourism? At this stage, does the Minister consider it necessary

to undertake a review of training within that industrial sector? Furthermore, having completed that review, can she ensure that funding is made available to modernise the training courses and techniques?

Ms Hanna: The Northern Ireland Skills Task Force has commissioned research on skills and training specifically within the tourism and hospitality sector in Northern Ireland, and I expect to receive the report very soon. For that research to be meaningful, it must involve all aspects of tourism and the hospitality industry. Adequate funding is also essential if the review is to be meaningful.

3.30 pm

“One” Service

17. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when the “One” service will be operational in Strabane and Omagh; and to make a statement. (AQO 870/01)

Ms Hanna: The “One” service, which is a single work-focused gateway to a range of welfare benefits, is currently being piloted in the Dungannon area. The roll-out of the service to other parts of Northern Ireland is subject to a full evaluation of the pilot, which has been extended to March 2003.

Mr McElduff: Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. Has there been any preliminary feedback, or have lessons been learnt, from the Dungannon experience?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Unfortunately, we are out of time. Perhaps the Minister would write to Mr McElduff with a response.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Rural Cottages in Strabane and Omagh District Council Areas

1. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total number of rural cottages in Strabane and Omagh district council areas that have yet to be included in the programme for refurbishment or replacement. (AQO 878/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): There are 23 rural cottages in the Strabane District Council area and three cottages in the Omagh District Council area that have yet to be included in the programme for refurbishment or replacement.

Mr Hussey: It is refreshing to receive a straight answer, an answer which clearly demonstrates that something must be done about the balance between the two parts of west Tyrone.

The Minister will be aware of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive consultation document, ‘Places for People — A Rural Housing Policy Review’, the overall objective of which relates to the regional development strategy. A recent audit in the places for people review has identified the need for a clearer focus on rural new build. Will the Minister assure the Assembly that he will use his influence to ensure that planners, even though they may be located in another Department, are encouraged to be supportive of rural new build?

Mr Dodds: First, I thank the Member for his reference to straight answers. It helps if a precise question is put to which one can give a definite answer, and in turn I compliment him on his question.

Planning issues lie outside my remit. Although the Member makes a relevant and important point, it is not something over which I have any control. With regard to my Department addressing issues such as unfitness in rural areas, the Member will know that there are provisions in the housing Bill, which is due to come before the Assembly, to address some of those issues. I hope that they will go some way to alleviate the issue of unfitness not only in rural cottages but also in rural areas generally.

Mr McMenamin: Who will carry out the refurbishment of rural cottages? Why have housing associations not undertaken this work in the past? How can the Northern Ireland Housing Executive continue to plan, design and complete such work when its new build capacity has been removed? I hope the Minister can be precise.

Mr Dodds: I certainly will be precise, because the answer is clear, and anyone who knows anything about housing would know the answer. The Housing Executive is involved in the design and planning of all new build programmes, and housing associations may carry out this work. The Housing Executive plays a central role in identifying needs throughout Northern Ireland, and in consultation with communities draws up new build schemes. There is nothing different about rural cottages. To be precise, the replacement cottages are being provided by housing associations. The schemes have been included in the social housing new build programme, and the timing will depend on how speedily the technical problems can be resolved.

Of the 50 cottages in the Omagh area, 18 have been replaced, nine have been improved, 20 have either been sold or tenants have refused the work and three remain to be assessed. In the Strabane area there are 212 cottages, of which 46 have been replaced, 12 have been improved, 22 are in the process of being replaced by housing associations, 20 are in the housing association new build programme, 89 have either been sold or tenants have refused the work and 23 remain to be assessed.

Mr Gibson: There is unfitness in the rural housing stock, particularly in West Tyrone, which is a real problem. Can the Minister indicate how he intends to tackle that problem, and can he comment on whether it can be eradicated?

Mr Dodds: As I said in answer to the earlier question, the housing Bill will include provisions that will go some way to addressing some of those issues. It will give the Housing Executive the power to use more discretion in relation to the private sector grants scheme, and that provision is aimed specifically at allowing it to target resources to areas such as the western part of the Province, where unfitness levels are highest, and to other rural parts of the Province. Members have frequently drawn my attention to that issue, and we will be addressing it in the housing Bill.

I have already mentioned that a programme of work is under way to tackle unfit cottages in rural areas and to replace them. We are trying to address rural unfitness, and the provisions in the housing Bill will be critical in that regard.

Housing Executive Houses – Lisburn District

2. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Executive houses that were built in the Lisburn district in the years 1998-99; 1999-2000; and 2000-01. (AQO 900/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive built 19 houses in the Lisburn district in 1998-99, two houses in 1999-2000 and two houses in 2000-01. As the Member will know, housing associations now provide all new build social housing in Northern Ireland, and, in the above periods, they provided 86 houses, 229 houses and 17 houses respectively.

Mr Poots: Does the Minister recognise that the number of house sales is far exceeding the number of new houses that are becoming available at a public level? Consequently, will the Department for Social Development lobby the Department of the Environment in relation to the Belfast metropolitan area plan so that a portion of that land can be designated for public sector housing, given that the public sector obviously cannot compete with private developers in acquiring land, which is quickly running out.

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. It is a matter for the Planning Service, as the Member knows, to identify areas that are suitable for housing. The Housing Executive engages in discussions with the planning authorities and others about the appropriate housing mix for areas, and that will continue.

I note the Member's point about the Lisburn area. As far as my Department and the Housing Executive are concerned, we are trying to build sustainable

communities, and that entails a mixed housing provision, involving private ownership, social housing and co-ownership. I am convinced that that approach will, in the long run, provide for stable communities. It is for the planners to identify suitable areas, but my Department and the Housing Executive will discuss the appropriate housing mix for Lisburn, and other areas, with them.

Housing Shortage – Portstewart and Portrush

3. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his plans for solving the current housing shortage in Portstewart and Portrush. (AQO 883/01)

Mr Dodds: In Portstewart 40 households are considered to be in housing stress. Acquisition of suitable sites for new social housing continues to be a problem. However, as an interim measure, housing associations have been asked to acquire existing properties to help reduce the waiting list. Four dwellings have already been purchased, and a further four are in the pipeline. In addition, housing associations are actively seeking sites for new housing. If those can be identified and acquired, there is provision in the housing programme to start 10 new dwellings in 2002-03 and a further 10 in 2003-04. My Department has earmarked the funding to undertake this much-needed work.

Thirty-nine households in Portrush are considered to be in housing stress. In 2002-03, Ark Housing Association plans to provide 15 properties for people with mental health problems. In addition, housing associations have been asked to identify sites for 10 dwellings for elderly people in 2003-04.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that there are enormous pressures on land in desirable areas such as seaside towns. Does the Minister agree that in these circumstances social housing is a particular problem given the enormous financial power of developers to acquire all available developing land for holiday homes? Does he agree that the time has come for special measures to ensure social housing is ring-fenced for people who cannot afford to buy into the private sector?

Mr Dodds: That is a well-made point. That is an issue in particular areas, such as the Portrush/Portstewart area and other areas that are popular with tourists. It also applies to areas where land prices are expensive. The issue of second homes in the Portrush/Portstewart area adds to the difficulty. The need for new building is acknowledged, and the Member will agree with that. Housing associations are actively looking for suitable sites. Sites are expensive in that area, and that undoubtedly impacts on the ability of housing associations to produce viable projects at reasonable cost, and so on.

I will consider the matter. To some extent, we are at the mercy of market forces. Nevertheless, the issue identified by the Member — and raised by other Members on several occasions — is important, and we in the Department, in conjunction with the Executive and housing associations in particular, will be doing everything in our power to try to address that issue.

Housing Bill

4. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the timescale for the introduction of the housing Bill to the Assembly; and to make a statement. (AQO 875/01)

Mr Dodds: Subject to the approval of the Executive Committee, I hope to publish the draft housing Bill for consultation in the near future, with a view to introducing the Bill in the Assembly in June 2002. That timetable will be subject to the outcome of the consultation process.

Mr McGrady: I am delighted to hear that yet again we have a timetable in the not too distant future for this hairy and old Bill. I hope that the Bill's gestation improves as we go along. Will the Minister give a preview of the matter and confirm whether the provisions of the proposed Bill will deal in general terms with the future of the Housing Executive as a meaningful Housing Executive? Secondly, will there be a provision in the legislation whereby the disabled facilities grant for children and other such groups would not be means-tested?

Mr Dodds: Clearly, it is our desire to ensure that the Bill is advanced at the earliest possible opportunity. The matter left the Department for Social Development some time ago. As I said, it is subject to the approval of the Executive Committee. There will then be a period of consultation, and the matter will be brought before the House.

As the Member has indicated, many of these issues have been around for years. I want to debunk the myth that many of the provisions in the housing Bill are landmark, far-reaching proposals. Some of them will make a significant difference to the quality of housing in Northern Ireland, particularly with regard to antisocial measures, grants issues and others. Some of these issues date back as far as 1995-96. It is now time that we made progress and got some of these provisions onto the statute book.

The Member raised the issue of the disabled facilities grant. That is currently under consideration and discussion, and a review is under way. I dealt with it on my last appearance at Question Time. We have not yet concluded our consideration of that matter, but it is something that we are looking at. There would be costs attached to any of the changes that the Member wants, and we would have to look at that and bring it

before the Assembly. I will write to the Member about the other matter.

3.45 pm

Mr S Wilson: The Minister is right when he says that the housing Bill will contain many provisions that will be of great benefit to people in their everyday lives, including the legislation on antisocial behaviour, et cetera.

Given the delays in bringing the Bill to the House — and he might want to comment on why there have been delays — will the Minister assure us that it will be on the statute book before the end of this Assembly session?

Mr Dodds: It is impossible to give guarantees on anything in life, particularly when it comes to the Assembly. However, if we proceed to consultation in the near future, I have no doubt that we will be able to get this legislation on to the statute book well before the deadline for next year's Assembly elections. However, if there is further slippage and the Bill does not come out of OFMDFM, where it has been for some time, in the near future, and if it does not proceed through the consultation process, then we are going to run into difficulties. People who are concerned about some of the issues to be addressed in the Bill will not understand why there is further delay and slippage on issues that have been around for a long time, particularly in the light of recent comments about the paucity of legislation coming through the Assembly.

Here is a piece of legislation that can make a real difference to people's lives. The public will broadly welcome it. It has been given a strong welcome by the Committee for Social Development. Let us now proceed to get it out to consultation and on to the floor of the House. Let us have the debate and get some of those provisions into legislation as soon as possible.

Mr Hamilton: The Minister has touched briefly on my question. Does he agree that the Committee for Social Development has long taken an interest in the progress of this important piece of legislation, and that it has been instrumental in ensuring that the legislative proposals will be subject to proper public consultation? Does he agree that it will be important to pay particular attention to what the Committee has to say about the provisions that should be in the Bill?

Mr Dodds: The Committee has had, and will continue to have, a very legitimate role in the consultation process on the Bill. Mr Hamilton is aware that the Committee recently brought forward a report that was debated in the House and was broadly in line with the provisions in the Bill.

There is sometimes a tendency when a Bill comes forward to look, not so much at what is in it, but at what else could be in it. That is quite legitimate.

However, given the length of time that we have to get this Bill — and the provisions that have been around for so long — on to the statute book, it may be wiser to concentrate on getting that done. New measures should be a task for another day. I fear that if we get into a long, protracted rehearsal of all the other things that could be thrown in, it might well be that we will run out of time and not get anything done.

I am not saying that we cannot look at any other measures. The Committee has an important role to play, and I am determined that it will be given that role. It already has that role under the procedures of the Assembly.

Multi-Element Improvement Scheme - Rathfriland

6. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister for Social Development what funding is to be made available to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for its proposed multi-element improvement scheme for 47 dwellings in Rathfriland. (AQO 871/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive proposes to carry out multi-element improvements to 47 dwellings in Rathfriland at an estimated cost of more than £1 million. That scheme is programmed to start on site in the 2003-04 financial year, subject to the availability of finance at that time.

Mr Bradley: I note the Minister's comment that development will not occur until 2003-04. For those who live in inferior accommodation, a year, two years or three winters is a long time away. Is there a remote chance that the Rathfriland development could be brought forward by any means?

Mr Dodds: The Member will know that the Housing Executive, as in other areas, has a planned programme of work that depends on its assessment of need. At present, the Housing Executive does not envisage that the Rathfriland scheme can be started earlier than planned. The Member asks whether there is any possibility that the scheme can be brought forward. If the Assembly were to make additional funding available to my Department, all sorts of things would be possible. I have repeatedly stressed my commitment to securing sufficient funding for housing in Northern Ireland. I know that many Members share that commitment, and I shall continue to work on that front. I shall be glad of the support of every Member of the House as we seek to come by the additional finance that would allow the measure that the Member has rightly raised, as well as other programmes, to proceed more rapidly.

Document Production - Costs

7. **Mr Close** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the cost of producing documents for consultation

in the past three years, including preparation, printing, distribution and all ancillary costs. (AQO 881/01)

Mr Dodds: No costs were incurred in 1999-2000. In 2000-01, the cost was £7,753. To date, the cost for this year has been £20,992. Those figures do not include time spent by staff in producing the documents, as separate records for such costs are not maintained.

Mr Close: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply. Was a cost benefit analysis done before those sums of money were spent? Does the Minister not agree that those sums could have contributed to hip replacements, coronary care or day care surgery, and as such, would have been better spent?

Mr Dodds: I recognise that question, as I was present for the earlier set of questions. The Member has evidently decided that he will not spend too much time thinking up new or tricky questions. As a Minister, one issue about which I hear all the time is the need for consultation. Members of the House, its Committees and other people continually ask me whether there has been consultation. If I were to turn round to Members and communities, especially on matters of housing, social welfare, community and voluntary development, and social legislation, and tell them that the Member for Lagan Valley believes that £7,000 or £20,000 is too much to spend on documentation to allow for proper and informed consultation, they would not be very happy. That expenditure represents reasonable value for money. We all share the Member's concerns. If he is keen to pursue the issue of money being better spent, I suggest that he consider, as a means of finding extra money, the amount of money that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety spends on the translation of documents into Irish.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It's in Chinese and Taiwanese.

Mr Dodds: If the Member looks at the cost of each of the questions that he has tabled on the matter, he would have had at least another £520, perhaps, to spend on hip replacements, rather than being here today.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Minister would be more than alarmed to learn that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety spent £110,000 last year on the translation of her documents into the Irish language.

That money would have improved the community's well-being significantly. Will views that are submitted as a result of the consultation be acted upon? That would prove the value for money of such consultation.

Mr Dodds: The expenditure incurred by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is a matter for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Members will raise the issue of wastage, as they have in the past. Consultation is important, and the Department for Social Development does not

pay lip service to it. We take people's views into consideration. The areas for which the Department for Social Development has responsibility depend on close consultation with client groups, customers and communities.

The views of the voluntary and community sectors greatly influenced the compact between Government and the voluntary and community sectors; that was a jointly prepared document. Anyone who reads that document will see the degree of consultation and the degree to which the views that were expressed in the consultation were taken on board by the Department. It produced remarkable consensus. There are other areas that I could mention. Consultation is important, and the costs that I have outlined are by no means exorbitant.

Lifetime Homes Design

8. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he is taking to implement the recommendations contained in the recent report by the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation into lifetime homes design. (AQO 873/01)

Mr Dodds: I attended the launch of the report into lifetime homes, and I welcomed its publication. In 1997, the then Department of the Environment adopted lifetime homes principles for the social housing programme in Northern Ireland. In 1998, the housing association grant payable to registered housing associations for social housing schemes was adjusted to provide additional funding to support this standard by way of a special lifetime homes multiplier. In April 2001, the Department for Social Development made it a requirement for housing associations to build all new general needs housing to lifetime homes standards, and additional funding was made available to facilitate the policy change.

Uniquely in the United Kingdom, the Department for Social Development continues to give financial support to provide lifetime homes in this sector. The Department will need time to study the report's recommendation for the establishment of a Northern Ireland building standards and design forum. Although there are obvious advantages in bringing together key groups such as the Chartered Institute of Housing and the housing associations, it is important not to duplicate areas that are already covered by existing arrangements. The report's recommendation that building regulations should be raised to apply lifetime homes to private sector housing is a matter for the Department of Finance and Personnel. The Member may wish to raise that directly with the Minister.

Mrs I Robinson: What is the additional cost of providing a house to lifetime homes standard?

Mr Dodds: The costs associated with providing a house to lifetime homes standards is an issue for builders and contractors. However, implementing it would be a

saving to the public purse for many years. The additional cost depends on the size, layout, design and specification of the home. The report on lifetime homes estimates the additional cost to be between £165 and £545. However, the overall costs may be higher. The Department estimates that it will cost approximately 1% of total acquisition works and associated costs. Nevertheless, over the lifetime of a house the savings for the public purse are likely to be considerable.

Disability Living Allowance Appeals

9. **Mr Davis** asked the Minister for Social Development what percentage of appeals are successful against decisions by the Social Security Agency to reject claims for disability living allowance. (AQO 884/01)

4.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister will be brief.

Mr Dodds: In the current financial year, 55% of appeals against decisions to disallow disability living allowance were successful. However, 25% of all appeals against disability living allowance decisions, including those in dispute of awards at lower than the maximum rate, were successful.

Mr Davis: Given the percentage of claims that are successful and the fact that those disputing disability allowance decisions are the most vulnerable, is it acceptable that it should take 11 months for some appeals to be heard?

Mr Dodds: That is a cause for concern. However, the latest figures show that on average it takes 72 days to prepare each appeal and to pass it to the appeals service. There have been 615 appeals this year, in comparison with the 1,219 appeals that awaited referral to the appeals service at this time last year. The situation is improving, but I would be happy to examine any specific cases that the Member wishes to draw to my attention.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. Your time is up.

Mr Molloy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister for Social Development referred to the provision of publications in Irish by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. From a sitting position, his party leader referred to the publication of documents in Chinese and Taiwanese. Will you examine Hansard and read those comments in the light of racial equality requirements and the need to publish documentation so that proper services are provided for everyone?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I did not hear those remarks, if indeed they were made. However, the Speaker's Office will examine Hansard.

Mr S Wilson: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you rule that Mr Molloy's comment was not a point of order and had nothing to do with the Minister's reply. Mr Dodds simply drew attention to the amount of money that is spent on translating documents into the Irish language?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Molloy's point of order related to a remark that was made from a sedentary position. However, we should not take up any more time.

REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the proposed Terms of Reference for the Review of Public Administration. — [*The First Minister and The Deputy First Minister.*]

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As a Member for Mid Ulster, a constituency west of the Bann, I wish to address the need to rebalance the distribution of Government services and jobs to ensure that everyone has proper access to them. The Health Service west of the Bann has undergone tremendous change as a result of a lack of provision and available finance. The Hayes review examined the matter, but, unfortunately, it was of little benefit. The Hayes review, the Burns Report and the relocation of Civil Service jobs and Departments should be regarded as part of the review, but they are separate.

The purpose of the review of the public service is to make the Departments and the Administration more accountable. The Administration must be democratically elected, and I agree with Mr Dalton that we should remove the health and education boards. That drastic step would quickly create a democratic system. Their functions should be transferred to Departments and local government bodies. However, if any new increased powers are to be transferred to local government, we must ensure that clear guarantees are incorporated. Those powers were removed from local government because the Unionist Government in Stormont misused them. Therefore a d'Hondt-type structure is needed to ensure equality at all levels, within the Assembly and in local government. We must wipe out quangos and ensure that we do not replace them with another type of quango that would undermine the system of local government.

We need to look at alternatives. We are in a period of transition. Whatever new structures are put in place, be they local government, the Assembly, or whatever the review may recommend, they must be matched up with the all-Ireland structures. A number of councils are grouped with other councils on the other side of the present border. That system continues to ensure the delivery of services.

We are considering the delivery of the waste management strategy and European programmes. There is no reason for those groups of councils on both sides of the present border not looking at the delivery of the Health Service, infrastructure, education and various other different roles that involve government structures on both sides of the border. Those structures need to be developed economically, as European money will eventually dry up, and we need to ensure that similar structures are in place to manage the present transition to all-Ireland structures.

There is a need to get on with the review. The Departments and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are meeting the Programme for Government aim to put the review in place by spring. However, we need to see not just the outline programme, but the implementation of the review put in place and delivered on. It is not just a matter of reviewing; it is a matter of dealing with the development of that programme.

We need to make sure that that structure is well in place before the next local government elections. Last year, we had the debacle of whether the council elections should be put back for a year or two to allow the review to take place. The review may be subject to Boundary Commission hearings. Various different structures may be proposed. Local government elections should not be put back for another year while these factors are determined.

This is a great opportunity to develop and put in place a new, modern structure for local government and local administration, whether it be here at the Assembly or at local government level. It is also a great opportunity to ensure that quangos are not maintained. Some Members this morning mentioned better training for those involved in quangos. I would rather see democratically elected, accountable members. I would like to ensure that quangos are wiped out, rather than have their members retained. We need to move into a new structure with accountable government. I say that in the broadest terms.

The needs of the local community have to be taken into account. Targeting social need is important when the structures of administration are being reviewed. We need to target social need — it should not just be three letters at the end of the review. We have to ensure that areas west of the Bann have a system that will make local government accountable and accessible and will deliver to the people.

One of the problems with the quango system, especially the health and education boards, is that no matter what a Department may say, an area board has the final say in the allocation of money and what provision is made in that area. A small area such as the Six Counties should be one administrative area. While we do not want to see one big board based in Belfast allocating all the money east of the Bann, we do want to ensure a fair distribution of the available resources.

We need to ensure that this happens quickly and in an accountable manner so that that in a short time we will be sitting here with a new structure of administration. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Savage: I welcome the review. It is now time to consider tightening up public administration in Northern Ireland. The review should have two principles enshrined at its heart — democratic accountability and democratic control. We must leave behind the residue of direct rule and by that I mean the large number of

non-elected quangos that the Government used to run Northern Ireland before the creation of the Assembly.

Whatever system of public administration is adopted, it is important that it should dovetail with the Assembly. At present the Northern Ireland councils exist like an older, parallel level of administration. I have great admiration for, and sympathy with, the councils, because I served on one for many years. Young Members could learn the pros and cons of local administration by serving for a term on councils. It would do them no harm, and it should be an enshrined principle that Members serve on local government bodies.

Any new system should work to, be accountable to and support Stormont. Unlike one of the Members from a reputable party who spoke — I will not name him, because I do not want to get caught up in catcalling — I do not believe that we can have too much democracy. We need more democracy, not less, because it is lacking in many areas. I remind everyone that the Assembly was created by an agreement, which was a sort of peace treaty that was negotiated at the end of a long war. We should never forget that. Having a large Assembly at Stormont is preferable to what we had before.

We must consider many issues in addition to the number of councils. We want to create as professional a public representation as possible. That raises issues about the optimum size and number of councils. It is also important to build watchdog bodies into any new system. It is crucial that the whole architecture of public administration in Northern Ireland should be clear cut, easily understood and, above all, democratic.

The delay in bringing the legislation forward was mentioned this morning. We know where the blame for that delay lies. Too many times in the past three years people attempted to bring the Assembly down, and it limped from crisis to crisis. That is where time was spent. That is the nub of the matter. Now that the review of public administration is about to start, people ask why it has taken so long. We have only to cast our minds back 18 months to answer that question.

The Assembly must consider many other issues, such as what is the answer to the question of dual mandate. We must face up to reality. We can refer to the devolved Administrations in Wales and Scotland and their dual mandate roles. What is good for one Assembly is good for another. I do not care what people in other circles think — accountable democracy is the one thing that is to the fore in most people's minds. Accountable democracy is all things to all men. We must ask where our loyalties lie. I listened to other Members, and many were talking to suit themselves. — *[Interruption]*.

My remarks are starting to bite home.

We have a wealth of talent in Northern Ireland. People have had a good introduction to politics, and the sooner we return to accountable democracy the better. The most important consideration is the return to the days of “one man; one job”. Those were the good old days, and the sooner we get them back the better, and I hope — [Interruption].

A Member: What good old days?

Mr Savage: That is going back a long time, but the sooner we get back to that the better. No matter what the circumstances are, Northern Ireland has come through a crisis. Whether we like it or not, the situation is better now than it was three years ago.

4.15 pm

The Assembly has a big responsibility to ensure that the review is carried out fairly. The Assembly prides itself on its democracy. The sooner accountable democracy returns to Northern Ireland, the better.

Mr A Doherty: As a member of the Committee for the Environment, I endorse the initial comments on the terms of reference that were agreed by the Committee at its meeting on 21 February. The Committee Chairperson submitted them to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

The SDLP is engaged in exhaustive internal and external consultation on the matter, and it will publish its conclusions in due course. Every conclusion will reflect the aims, objectives and policies of the SDLP and will flow from its unique philosophy and principles. The SDLP’s principles are based on its passion for social and political justice. The party is firmly anti-sectarian and seeks to achieve true unity and equity by consent. It is absolute in its defence of and promotion of human rights. It respects, cherishes and accommodates difference. It looks towards the creation of true partnerships.

The Government of Northern Ireland, as exemplified in the Assembly, is a goulash. It is a highly seasoned stew, a complicated melange of right, left and centre, from far right to soft centre, democrat, totalitarian, libertarian, fascist, socialist, fundamentalist, religious, quasi-religious, atheist, humanist, ethnic, indigenous and intrusive. Public administration in Northern Ireland must take account of the complexities of that mixture and, as far as is possible and reasonable, accommodate those differences.

My initial personal comments will eschew the particular and be limited to a few generalities. The first relates to the dangers of unprincipled prediction or, more accurately, the self-fulfilling prophecy. How often does that fulfilment create difficulty, disorder and sometimes despair? How many of Northern Ireland’s young people have had their lives blighted and unfulfilled because they were deemed a failure at the age of ten? We run the

risk of messing up the process if we take undue account of the predictions of self-appointed savants in the media, and even in the Chamber, who claim that their solution is inevitable and right. Those people call for the removal of councils, boards, trusts, quangos and partnerships. However, what would replace them? Would there be a lean, mean Government machine? As they say in Magilligan “Aye, likely”.

That bout of cynicism is, for the large part, a response to the trumpeting about what must be done about councils. It is claimed that if the number of councils were cut to five or six, the problem would be solved. Perhaps 26 councils are not needed. However, before the Assembly butchers an elected and truly local administration — a community service that, however flawed, maintained a degree of sanity and democracy in this torturous society for 30 years — it must be sure that its replacement will be better. The decision must be based on neither mathematics nor population engineering, but on people — on individuals and their need to be able to communicate face to face with their leaders.

The sadist who contrived the appalling acronym “quango” virtually guaranteed that those bodies would not be taken seriously. “Quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation” is a pretentious term, but “quango” is a ludicrous one — it is like a cross between a duck and a dingo. We are right to criticise the undemocratic nature of remote, appointed and imperfectly accountable bodies. However, the Assembly must acknowledge the need for public bodies that draw together and make good use of the talents of people, elected and non-elected, who by their special experience, expertise and commitment might give valuable service to a Government of the people. However, to give those groups stupid names would spoil their purpose.

I shall conclude with a litany. Public administration must be efficient, effective, economic, open, transparent, accountable, democratic, equitable, inclusive and compassionate. If we get those few things right, we shall have it made.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I am sure that the House was very entertained by the last speech. We shall have to take another look at the hybrids that were so picturesquely described. We did not think that they had such a genealogy or that they were of such importance to those who study birds, beasts and other creatures. We were glad to hear that contribution. I am glad that I am not on, nor have ever had the pleasure of being on, any of those bodies. I am glad that I am excluded from them. Thank God for that. That is one thing to say on Monday — thank God for that.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I shall speak on the Committee’s behalf. The Committee met last Friday to discuss and

consider the review and asked me to make this agreed statement.

Public administration in its broadest sense lies at the heart of the Committee's weekly deliberations in this Building and elsewhere and features much in the business of the House. The Committee welcomes the statement that the involvement of the Assembly and its Committees from the outset will be essential to the review's success. However, there are issues about how individual Committees might be involved. In his reply, I want the Minister to outline how he thinks he can compel Committees to make a vital contribution to the review.

Members and their parties have a wide variety of views. We heard a ringing call from the Front Bench to Mr Trimble to give up his seat in Upper Bann. He may not have much trouble doing that — somebody may take his seat from him. What we heard from the Front Bench of the Unionist Party would then be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Member strangely advised us that we should all have dual membership of the Assembly and local councils, where we could be taught the ABC of public administration. However, that duality should be banned upon election to higher places such as the Westminster Parliament, or even the European Parliament, because we would be unfit to take in what was going on in the Assembly and in council meetings. It is nice to hear such a ringing call from that Member about the resignation of his leader. I trust that the leader of that party will consider it and act accordingly.

Members of other parties will bring their individuality, political ingenuity and political findings to the debate. However, bearing in mind that each Statutory Committee has a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role to play on behalf of the Department with which it is associated, there is an argument that participation by Committees in the review should be limited to the consideration of matters concerning their related Departments. Will each Committee have the opportunity to review the reviewers? Will Committees be able to summons them to appear before them to find out why the reviewers are making the representations they are?

We do not know who those people are. The debate would have been more interesting had the First Minister announced their names. We could then have examined their credentials and asked why they were appointed.

Some time out of the blue, the First Minister will tell us who they are at a meeting in the Long Gallery. It will certainly not be first announced in the House. Nothing is first announced in the House.

Members also noted that rural proofing is mentioned in the suggested parameters to inform those who will be conducting the review. The joke is that last Friday the Minister told the Committee for Agriculture and

Rural Development that the group that she had set up to examine rural proofing had not yet come to a final opinion on what it really is, so if no one knows what rural proofing is, how can parameters be set? Members of the Committee are concerned that little if any progress has been made on implementing the policy on rural proofing, because it has not yet been defined. That was, and is, an integral part of the Programme for Government, but so far, two years later, nothing has been done.

I lay aside my cap as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development to make representation on matters about the debate that concern me and members of my party. We should all be concerned that the progress boasted about by all the members of the pro-agreement parties has not taken place. If Mr Close had made his statement at the time of the referendum, he would have been up to date. Many of the things he said during the referendum debate were retracted in his speech today. I did not hear many of the pro-agreement parties crying out about 10 Departments having become 11 with the setting up of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. It was all "jobs for the boys", and everyone had to get in, because if they had not done so, there would have been no agreement. No one would have been let in unless there was enough to go round. Unfortunately, they hung themselves up on the recommendation from Europe on how that should be done. It was never thought that two of the seats could fall to the Democratic Unionist Party, as perhaps could a third. We were told about rogue Ministers who would not be allowed to take their seats. However, it did not work out that way, because some of us were wise enough to investigate the legal position.

Mr Close: As one of the boys who did not get a job, could we not have been arguing to ensure that the Democratic Unionist Party was represented on a power-sharing Executive? We are disappointed that it has not taken its seats. Does the Member recognise that we are debating a review whose credibility lies in the fact is that it is prepared to look at everything and ensure that ratepayers and taxpayers get best value for money?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I am not responsible for the Member's not getting a job. It was a member of his own party who kept him from getting a good job in the Assembly. Do not blame the DUP; he should look to his own kennel and deal with the person who treated him so disgracefully. The DUP is blamed for many things, but it cannot be blamed for that. That had nothing to do with the DUP. I wish that everything could go the Member's way, but it will not do that, and part of his statement admitted that.

This review is not open, above board and transparent. First, it will be under the control of the First Minister

and the Deputy First Minister. The First Minister and his former Deputy First Minister did not have much regard for the Committee of the Centre.

4.30 pm

They have attended one of its meetings. Two junior Ministers were appointed to help the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, but neither could be present at the meetings. Therefore, the Committee of the Centre has not received great encouragement.

Mr Gallagher told us that the Committee of the Centre should not be allowed to review the review. It is little wonder; he knows that the Committee would introduce independent thought into how the review should take place.

The first thing that we should do is make a representation to the Westminster Parliament that the Committee of the Centre should become a Statutory Committee with powers equivalent to the other Committees, so that it can do its job thoroughly. Until we have a Statutory Committee to look after the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, we will not have fair play, transparency or equality in the Assembly. We can be sure of that.

The First Minister has told us nothing today. We do not know who these people are. We do not know how much they will be paid. We do not know when they will meet. We do not know how they will be monitored. We do not know whether a Committee will be able to call them before it. We do not know anything. We are just told that the review is being set up. Given all that, the First Minister has the cheek to tell us that it will be made up of independent people. I am sure that when we examine their credentials, we will know where their independence lies.

The previous Member who spoke jovially said a great deal about quangos. However, you do not get to be on a quango because you have intelligence. You get to be on a quango because you are a safe person who will do what the powers that be want you to do. To qualify for a position on a quango you must nail your colours to the mast; you must fight a seat; and you must ensure that a Democratic Unionist candidate is standing for that seat. The Democratic Unionist candidate will beat you, and, when you are beaten, you will then get a job on a quango.

My party has no seats on any quangos. It has been lied to by Secretaries of State; it has been lied to by the Prime Minister; it has been lied to by officers in various Governments. It is represented on the Housing Executive only because the Northern Ireland Housing Council appointed the person that it nominated.

Mr Close complained that he did not get a job. The Alliance Party got plenty of jobs on the quangos. If you are a defeated member of the Alliance Party, you

are on your way, and you do not need to serve a year in local government to gain experience. As was recommended by the spokesperson of the Official Unionist Party, you can get in immediately. It is a safe journey to a place on a quango.

Quangos have eternal life. Their membership, which is made up of safe men, is renewed from time to time. Someone brought me a list from a certain Government office, and I had a look at the names that are considered each time new appointments are made to the quangos. It made for most interesting reading. I wondered why so many people were on so many bodies. I discovered that this was the overall list used every time an appointment needs to be made to a quango. Therefore, a job on a quango is a job for life.

Nothing will be done to these quangos. In fact, we are setting up another quango today. It is a review quango that the Assembly knows nothing about. It does not know who will be on it. Does the First Minister know who will be on it?

Perhaps the Deputy First Minister can assist us by giving some clue as to whom he plans to appoint to the review body. It would liven up the debate if he could tell us a bit more. We are like *Oliver Twist*, sir; we are asking for more. The Deputy First Minister should tell us something more about that wonderful organisation. Of course, the review body will not report until after the next election, which is a wonderful scenario.

Once they have been defeated and have licked the dust in the local government elections, just look at how many men will be lining up and saying "Quango for me please. I fought my seat but I lost it, so there must be a quango for me." Why shall we not hear anything from that body before the election? Is it because those people are so capable, as the spokesman for the Official Unionist Party told us today? Many people in local government are very capable. However, is it through fear that some Members will lose out in the election that causes the review body to be careful before it reaches out its hands to the council?

Northern Ireland councils spend £260 million a year, which is only 3% of the country's total Budget. Therefore, why does everyone blame the councils? The boards' expenditure is £8.5 million. The expenditure of the trusts, area boards and other major non-elected quangos amounts to almost half of the country's Budget. The quangos do not give us value for money so they should go. Democracy can control expenditure only if elected representatives are in charge of it.

I love to listen to all those people attacking politicians. Politicians are evidently the worst people in the world. The only reason that such people attack politicians is that they cannot be politicians themselves. Those people cannot get elected. I know them; I have met them, and I have seen the miserable votes

that people cast for them. I have seen them standing with faces longer than a Lurgan spade when the election baskets are opened. I know all about them, and I wonder why they are so against the politicians. However, if the politicians that are elected to the Assembly have their hands tied, they cannot be blamed for what happens in the country. We cannot be blamed if half of our budgets are given to non-elected bodies — to quangos.

The review must first look at the Assembly, the way in which it works and what is expected of it. It must put the Assembly into the driving seat of politics in Northern Ireland. Here is where the decisions should be made, but they cannot be made under the present system. I was amazed when I received the 'Draft Terms of Reference and Parameters for the Review of Public Administration'. It is a great document. I recommend that Members read it tonight when they go to bed — they will be asleep within one minute. I see the Deputy First Minister smiling, because he knows what I am about to say. The document says that that quango will do something — it will

“bring forward options for reform”.

“Reform” is a good Protestant word. The Member who spoke before me did not refer to a single Catholic or Protestant when he spoke of the membership of those bodies. I am glad to say that I am a Protestant. I do not need to wear that across my chest — everyone knows that I am a Protestant.

I shall read more from this interesting document:

“bring forward options for reform which are consistent with the arrangements and principles of the Belfast Agreement”.

I want the Minister to be honest with the House and tell us what the arrangements and principles of the Belfast Agreement are. Then I want the Sinn Féiners, the Alliance Party, the Women's Coalition — who are absent — and the other absent Members to tell us what those arrangements and principles are. Finally, I want to ask the five different parties in the Official Unionist Party about their opinions on the arrangements and principles of the Belfast Agreement. *[Interruption]*. I say to Mr Kennedy that confession is good for the soul. They do not know — that is the trouble with the Belfast Agreement. Just as in the book of Judges, every man does what is right in his own eyes. They all have different views, and where the agreement can be twisted to mean something that suits certain people, it will be twisted.

The Deputy First Minister has an impossible task. He intends to bring forward options for reform consistent with the arrangements and principles of the Belfast Agreement. Which version of the Belfast Agreement? Which spectacles does one put on? Does one put on the very green spectacles of Sinn Féin/IRA, the less green spectacles of the SDLP or the tintured orange spectacles of some members of the Official Unionist Party? What glasses do you wear?

Everybody in this country knows that this is yet another review to put matters on the long finger, to delay matters until after the elections or until the people have to vote in a vacuum and in darkness, and then to speed on to gain control. It will not work, and that is clear from the fact that we are having this debate today.

Mr Close made a valid point that I was going to make myself. This is an interesting year — we were to have a review anyway. That is not something new, but we are not going to have it this year. We will have an announcement of a review this year, not the review itself, and we will not receive the report or have the finish of that review for many days to come.

Yet, face up to it — do Members not receive representations from the sick in their constituencies about the state of the Health Service? Do Members not go to the hospital wards and see people, not in a waiting room, but on a trolley? Do Members not see the sad state of our Health Service and talk to nurses, doctors and GPs about that matter? Do such people not come to Members? I could tell story after story about what is happening at this very moment in our Health Service. Surely the Assembly should not be engaged in review; rather it should be engaged in action. The Assembly should say “The Health Service needs our attention; let us put our best into that”. That issue crosses the entire political, religious and sectarian divide. Those people need help immediately — they cannot wait.

4.45 pm

We have troubles in education. Broken-down mobile classrooms, which defile the schoolyard, are still being used to school our children. People cannot believe that they are school classrooms. Education has problems, so should we not be attacking that? People who are not housed, who cannot get jobs or who bear the burden and heat of the day surround us, and yet we are discussing a review — a review with experts. We need somebody with enough expertise to help us to deal with the challenge of the present hour.

Remember, this House and its Members — no matter what we may think — will go. There is nothing like the election and the ballot box for giving people the chance to say what they think — and they will say what they think. We have an opportunity to do something. Instead of talking about something far off in the future, we should open our eyes to the present predicament. The House should decide that the time for action has come, not after the election but immediately. We should apply ourselves to good administration to save our Health Service, our education, our local services and all the rest. Those are the prime things to which we must direct our attentions.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome Dr Paisley's emphasis on the

health crisis and on underfunding in the Health Service. It was useful to hear that. I also seek clarification on whether Dr Paisley was offering to engage in direct dialogue with Sinn Féin about the principles underpinning the Good Friday Agreement. In engaging both Mr Molloy and myself directly, I felt he was clearly inviting us to take part in direct dialogue. If that is the case, I accept that invitation on behalf of our party.

Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo, nó is ábhar fíorthábhachtach é agus sinn sa Tionól ag pleanáil modh rialtais don toadhcháí.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this crucial debate. The point has already been made that it is overdue. When will the review be formally launched? Perhaps the Deputy First Minister can be specific about that. What will the timetable of the review be, bearing in mind that the next scheduled date for council elections is May 2005? New arrangements would have to be implemented before or by that time. Will the review be truly root and branch, because we all agree that an unduly complex mosaic of agencies and bodies administers the small area that is the Six Counties?

Mr Molloy reminded us that we are part of a society in transition. We must consider public service delivery models and mechanisms that will result in efficiency and effectiveness. I am drawn to the section of the 'Draft Terms of Reference and Parameters for the Review of Public Administration' that states:

"We need to consider the best use of our budget and ensure that any reorganisation creates the most effective and efficient services to the public, avoiding duplication and enabling managerial and bureaucratic expenditure to be minimised while the maximum resources are spent on front line services."

I particularly welcome that. This is where the North/ South dimension, underpinned in the Good Friday Agreement and in the new political institutions, must loom large in new arrangements. This should be aimed at avoiding precisely what we should avoid — the duplication of provision; it should aim at judicious expenditure of resources and at avoiding wastefulness.

Two systems on one small island for practically everything is an economic nonsense. The review of public administration should look beyond the border of the Six Counties. Partnerships, group systems and amalgams should be looked at similarly in the North and beyond. Presently there are many partnerships, or fluid collectives, such as the Irish central border area network, dealing with waste management, promotion of tourism and infrastructure development. We must look at models of good practice elsewhere in Ireland and Europe.

If this is a review for the twenty-first century, and if it is projecting decades into the twenty-first century, then we would be well advised to think beyond the parameters of the existing political entity — the Six Counties. It should be about removing the democratic

deficit. We have gone some way down that road already, but as regards planning, there is a real democratic deficit. Presently there are no elected representatives from district councils on health and social services boards, for example, but there are elected representatives on the education and library boards. So there is an anomaly there.

What type of individual tends to end up on such bodies? That must be looked at so as to avoid old cultures and old hierarchies. If Maurice Hayes's proposals for the future delivery of health services are anything to go by, then County Tyrone and County Fermanagh will be emasculated in the reconfiguration of public services. Presently Mr Hayes's proposals suggest that there should be a northern set-up, a southern set-up and an eastern set-up within the context of the Six Counties. The western region has effectively disappeared. I would hate to think that Maurice Hayes would be portentous of the future. Social deprivation is often defined by availability of access to essential services, and historically there has been huge underinvestment in and huge neglect of west of the Bann. We all know that. Let us ensure that that is not made permanent in the future.

I am not sure how this should be weighted, but some regard must also be shown for a sense of place — where people work, go to school, shop and enjoy recreation. There is a cultural factor to consider.

I want to hear more detail from the Minister about the democratic input and about how the consultation will be conducted. This review must enable and reach local communities. People talk about numbers and layers, but the ultimate issue is the quality of services. We must strive to achieve better quality provision of public services. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Hamilton: As a member of the Committee for Social Development I welcome the review, and I suspect that I am not alone in thinking that it is long overdue in the context of the establishment of the Assembly. I listened with interest to the justification for the terms of reference being drafted in such a way as to allow the review team to address issues that it believes warrant it. I will return to that point.

Before I do, I wish to make some observations and ask a few general questions about the terms of reference, which I feel will be of concern to the Committee for Social Development. I agree that a range of critically important issues must be addressed, but should they not be more clearly identified at this stage?

The Committee for Social Development is keenly interested to know if the review will extend to, and include, Next Steps agencies such as the Social Security Agency and the Child Support Agency? Will it extend to the role of the Housing Executive? That matter was raised by Dr Paisley among others. We would like to

know who the members of the review team will be. Who has chosen them, or who will choose them? Will they be paid?

We also want to know whether they will be different from the independent experts referred to. Are the independent experts different from the independent advisors referred to in the letter from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister dated 12 February? How much is the review expected to cost? What is the breakdown of that expenditure?

In common with other Members, I am surprised and somewhat disappointed that there is no time frame for the review. Surely the terms of reference for such a review must be focused and should include intermediate milestones and, above all, a date for completion. Otherwise, it will become a nightmare to manage. It could go on forever, and at a significant cost to the public purse. Surely it would have been sensible to produce a definitive list of organisations to be included in the review, and to test that list first on the Floor of the House. We are told that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will look closely at the Assembly about oversight of the review. What arrangements have been made in that regard?

I began by saying that I welcomed the review. I restate that position. However, I want assurances — assurances that the process has been thought through fully, assurances that the Assembly will be fully and properly involved and, finally, assurances about the management of the project, the costs involved and the timescale for its completion.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome the debate, but it is a great pity that the First Minister has not been present for the whole debate. Had he been here for Mr Hamilton's speech, which raised many important questions, he might have realised the degree of concern that exists even in his own party. Mr Hamilton asked many independent questions. He has probably ensured that he will remain an independent Back-Bencher after that speech. It is no use that David Trimble is not here.

The Deputy First Minister has had a long session here today. After resigning as Minister of Finance and Personnel, he probably thought that he had escaped listening to these long debates. However, the First Minister must have pulled rank and said that he had to sit there and listen to all of this. He has had a bit of an eye-opener today. He has had lectures on a political goulash recipe from his friend, Mr Arthur Doherty, and heard a bit about genetic engineering and quangos. He has also heard about crossing ducks and emus, or ducks and dingoes — I am not too sure what it was.

A Member: Dodos and emus.

Mr S Wilson: Dodos.

Mr Savage told him about the good old days when there were no double mandates such as his leader has today. Mr Close gave him a lesson in wheeling political wheelbarrows and ensuring that one makes no decisions by pushing things in a review ahead of oneself. I am not too sure what Mr Molloy said. On one hand, he was saying that he wanted to have fewer boards; on the other, he did not want them all centralised. On one hand he was saying that he wanted powers given to councils so that they could exercise cross-border responsibilities; on the other, he did not want the councils to have those.

It is a pity that the First Minister is not here, because what we are debating today is yet another example of the broken promises that he made to his party, to the Assembly and to the people of Northern Ireland. When the Administration was first set up, the DUP criticised the creation of 10 Departments for purely political reasons. He came under some criticism from his own party.

He wrote to all his party members saying that the costs would be neutral over the four-year period because there would be a review of administration.

5.00 pm

That, incidentally, was echoed in an answer that I was given during the first Budget debate by the now Deputy First Minister when I raised the fact that the public administration review had not taken place. We were told that we would have to wait and look at it in the context of the full four years of the Administration, that it would be cost-neutral over the four years. Perhaps that is the answer to Mr Close's earlier question about when that period was meant to start. I do not know when it was meant to start, but it is clear from what the First Minister has said, and from what the Deputy First Minister said in his previous post some time ago, that it was meant to be in place and delivering savings by the end of this session of the Assembly. They have failed to deliver on that promise.

It is not a new promise. In his 24 October 2000 statement on the Programme for Government, the First Minister said:

“We will introduce a review of public administration to ensure, among other things, that the costs of administration are minimised.”

Now, a year and a half after that promise was made, he is just getting round to publishing the terms of reference of the review, let alone getting the review under way. Ironically, at the same time as he made that promise, he also promised to progress work on the implementation bodies and areas of North/South co-operation. He got ahead with that one. He made sure that there was progress on that. That says something about the priorities of this Administration. Many Unionists are now turning against the Ulster Unionist Party because of those priorities. That party makes promises

about saving money on public administration, but it does not keep them. However, when it comes to North/South bodies, it seems to jump through all kinds of hoops to make sure that it keeps its coalition partners happy.

It is also significant that in October 2000 the then Minister of the Environment made a promise in the heat of the moment, probably to deflect some criticism. He said that the Ulster Unionist Party would deliver when it came to saving on administration. At his party conference in October 2000, he said:

“Under this party, I will make sure that it [the top-heavy public administration in Northern Ireland] is changed.”

He also said that he would have a team to draw up proposals and make recommendations before the local government elections last May. Almost a year later, that promise has not been delivered. It may have been a useful promise to make at a fairly contentious party conference, but the promise has not been fulfilled.

It could be argued that that is because the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is overworked. However, it has ensured that it has plenty of resources to carry out the work. We discussed the Budget proposals a couple of weeks ago; there was a line in the Budget for almost £16 million for

“assisting the Executive in making and implementing well-informed and timely policy decisions and improving public services.”

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister now spends nearly £40 million every year, yet we have no flow of legislation to the Assembly. We have had promises of reviews that have not taken place. A year and a half late, the review of public administration has finally come before the Assembly. All parties have generally welcomed it, although listening carefully to what has been said, it is clear that the road ahead is not going to be an easy one.

Do not forget that attempts were made under direct rule to reform public administration. I recall that one of the first debates in the Forum for Political Dialogue was on the reform of education and on reducing the number of education and library boards. That was five years ago. Have we got rid of them? No, we still have them. I do not know whether there is much contact among Ministers in the Executive, but the Minister of Education is currently trying to sell a proposal that not only should we have five education and library boards, but 20 collegiates as well, which will form yet another layer of education administration.

Let us not pretend that this will be easy. Mr Savage and Mr A Doherty both talked about the value of local councils. Mr Savage said that, under the Belfast Agreement, the people ratified the structures that have been agreed to date. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have made it clear in the document that we have received today that the number of Departments is not up for review.

Everyone has criticised quangos today, but once we start to identify which quangos are going, I suspect that even the Alliance Party will not be jumping up and down to get rid of them all. As my Colleague Dr Paisley has pointed out, nobody has benefited more. In fact, it is well known that the Alliance Party has its own version of the quiz game ‘Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?’ It is called “Who Wants To Be A Quango Chair?” It has had some big winners in the past: Bob Cooper won a seat; Oliver Napier won a seat; John Cushnahan won a seat; Will Glendinning won a seat. They have all had them. They were failed politicians, but they were well rewarded for their service. When it comes to looking at quangos, I suspect that there will not be the same unanimity as has been displayed here today.

I am disappointed that the number of Departments is not going to be looked at, because that is an indefensible situation. That point has already been made. I have another disappointment that the Deputy First Minister may be able to clarify. In the First Minister’s speech, he said that we need to lead the review and that the Executive will lead the process. Yet in the same breath, almost in the same sentence, he talked about the process having independence. Will the First Minister and the Executive lead the review, or will it be independent? How does one reconcile those two contradictory statements? There will be some concern if the review is led either by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister or by the Executive. If it has taken this long to establish the terms of reference of the review and get them into the public domain, how long will it be before the review is completed?

I will not go over all the points that other Members have covered in the terms of reference document. Some that have not been mentioned are important. First, we will consider whether the public service is the best way to deliver service. That is important. I know that, as politicians, we sometimes believe that if it is not done through the public service, it is no good. The Deputy First Minister will be aware of that, having been the Minister of Finance and Personnel. If we are to move towards a situation in which we raise money through bonds, the delivery of public services may have to change – they may have to be delivered in another way.

Taking into consideration what has been said about quangos, we have to find ways genuinely to harness the expertise that exists in civil society. I am glad that reference has been made to that. To use the terms employed in the review document, what is the future role of non-elected people who can bring expertise and experience to the delivery of particular services? In many walks of life that degree of expertise has been useful in public bodies. Another principle is to avoid duplication and enable managerial and bureaucratic expenditure to be minimised. I wonder, however,

whether the Executive are listening to that when I see the Department of Education pushing the proposals of the Burns Report.

The debate is crucial. As other Members have said, we cannot allow this to drag on. It must not be an exercise in getting the Executive over the next election. Given that a promise has been made, do they put it in a wheelbarrow and push it in front of them? We need political decisions not political barrow boys, so I hope that we see the real delivery of firm proposals this side of Assembly elections.

Mr Ford: It is a great pity that Dr Paisley is not in the Chamber because I was going to — possibly for the first time in this place — welcome the commitment that he gave to Alliance principles when he soundly announced the need for openness, accountability and inclusiveness. Mr S Wilson also followed up that point to some extent. Unfortunately, Dr Paisley went on to spoil it by casting aspersions, as did Mr Wilson, about jobs on quangos, suggesting that they were a particular feature of the Alliance Party. He may have gone back in history to the 1970s with some accuracy, although I am not aware what quango John Cushnahan was on. Members should be careful before they make such allegations.

In the last figures that I read more DUP Members came through the appointments procedure than Alliance Members. There were about 12 Ulster Unionists, 10 SDLP Members, one DUP Member and no Alliance Members. Mr Wilson may be just ahead of us, but he should be a little more careful.

If my interest should be declared, I admit to membership of four quangos as a nominee of Antrim Borough Council, three advisory groups and the Lower Bann LEADER. If my fellow councillors are prepared to put their confidence in me, perhaps the DUP should be less critical. There is no doubt that Northern Ireland is somewhat overgoverned and significantly over-administered. In that respect the review is long overdue. We must balance efficiency and effectiveness on the one hand with democratic accountability on the other. There is a trade-off between the two. Traditional partnerships must also be examined. Members are focusing on councils, but they account for only a small proportion of public expenditure. However, the question of whether fewer and larger councils with more functions are appropriate or whether we keep the present pattern with its local representation is not primarily what the review should focus on. Fundamentally, the issue is that of the major elements of administration — Government Departments and the quangos that are accountable to them.

First, there are more quangos than district councils. Secondly, they have more members than district councils. Thirdly, they have bigger budgets than councils. Apart

from quangos that operate as advisory bodies and bring in the kind of expertise that some have mentioned, the review should focus on those Executive functions that are wielded by non-elected bodies, given that we now have an elected democratic body. That is the only way in which we can address public expenditure and more effective service seriously.

There have been references today to private finance and to how we deal with such matters. I have no ideological hang-ups about that; however, the small capital market in Northern Ireland, the bureaucracy for relatively small-scale projects and the question of whether the public-service ethos that has developed here is amenable to bringing in such private expertise from outside Northern Ireland mean that there will be no easy answers. We must look for some more novel ways of funding.

5.15 pm

Effectiveness is a major challenge to this region because we have many features that are different from other regions in the UK and, to an extent, different from the Republic. We have not really addressed how we will meet the additional costs of providing public services across rural areas. A relatively sparse population over most of the south and west of Northern Ireland will create significant additional costs. We must work out how to address that so that we can provide local, quality services, such as health, for those who currently cannot get access to them.

Fundamentally more important than that are the hidden extra costs. We choose to maintain separate facilities that do not need to be maintained, but they are promoted because they recognise the divisions in this society. Within Greater Belfast, we already have many sports and leisure facilities that are seen as either Catholic or Protestant-used. The duplication of leisure facilities sitting short distances apart is something that we should not tolerate if we are serious about cutting the costs of public administration.

The position is similar with health centres, but the worst example is schools. In many cases we divide children on the grounds of gender, in almost all cases on the grounds of ability and in virtually every case on the grounds of religious background. There is no doubt that that adds to the cost of schools and to their administration and public transport costs. There are two examples of this in my constituency of South Antrim. When they reach 11 years of age, nearly all Catholics in the growing population of Crumlin leave every morning to go to school elsewhere. Randalstown, which has a similarly growing population, sees all of the Protestants leaving it, and, of course, every child who passes the 11-plus leaves both those villages. If these concerns are to be dealt with — and they are matched

by education administration — we need to start to tackle the issues of such divided facilities seriously.

Similarly, there is duplication in further and higher education. The most obvious examples are Stranmillis and St Mary's teacher training facilities, which sit two or three miles apart. They teach students to run a common curriculum, and they even manage to have a core curriculum for religious education. However, for some bizarre reason, we segregate our teachers.

Sammy Wilson quoted the First Minister as saying:

“we need to lead the Review and decide its outcome.”

It appears that the “we” refers to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and then the Executive will lead the process. He missed another “we” at the end of the statement.

“we look forward to constructive dialogue with Members throughout the process.”

Apparently “we” again refers to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I find the concept of the royal ‘we’ coming from Ministers difficult to take. However, I ask Ministers to reassess how the review can be accepted across the community if it is seen to be in the pockets of two Ministers, or even in the pockets of twelve Ministers.

As Séamus Close said, we believe — “we” meaning the Alliance Party — that the review must be fully independent and radical so that it can bring in external objectivity rather than purely the thinking from within the public administration and so that it can choose a variety of expertise. However, we do not wish to burden OFMDFM with any more work, having heard the Deputy First Minister, on Friday night, outline his difficulties with the amount of work that comes through that Department. I am aware that he is only recently in the position, and that he has long carried the burden of the Department of Finance and Personnel. We do not wish to overburden his civil servants.

However, when the First Minister talked about innovation when conducting the review, it was a disappointment to hear that that meant a web site — that is not an innovation. We need to bring in outside expertise to make the review fully effective, to retain openness and yet to keep in touch with the Executive, the Assembly and the wider public.

That would be proper innovation — not just talking about a web site.

We need to see a formal link between the review, the Assembly and the Executive, whether that be through the Committee of the Centre or the establishment of an independent Ad Hoc Committee.

I congratulate the Deputy First Minister on his stamina. He has clearly not lost his ability to sit through, and take account of, long debates in the Chamber. It is

unrealistic to expect a full response to these concerns today. It is to be hoped, however, that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will reconsider the issues raised, not just by those on the Opposition Benches at this end of the Chamber, but by the Back Benchers in the two governing parties at the other end, and bring back a slightly different set of proposals for us to consider.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): I am pleased at the level of interest that Members have shown in the review, as evidenced by the way in which they have contributed to today's debate. As was indicated in the correspondence earlier with the Committee Chairpersons and the Speaker, the active involvement of the Assembly will be important to the success of the review. The purpose of the debate is to start the process whereby the Assembly can offer views on the terms of reference. Some Members did do that, although others did not and went on excursions on other matters ranging far beyond the issue of public administration.

I appreciate Members' comments on the issues that they wish to see addressed, amplified or underlined in the terms of reference. Individual Committees have also begun to offer their views. That is helpful, and the Executive will take those into account. When we say “we” or “us”, we mean the Executive. We propose to seek formal Assembly endorsement of the terms of reference once the pre-consultation exercise has been concluded. That is one part of demonstrating that the review is not in the pockets of Ministers or civil servants. The Executive have furnished the Assembly and the Committees with draft terms of reference, and those will not be finalised without our consideration of the feedback and the suggestions made. That principle will extend throughout the life of the review, because the review will change a range of issues, and it will touch many aspects, not just of public administration but of everyday social, economic, cultural and environmental life in the region. The review will have an effect that will go well beyond the lifetime of this first Assembly — and even well beyond the lifetime of the second Assembly. If we consider the life cycle of the structures involved, these are arrangements that could last for a generation. In the review, therefore, it is right that we fully engage with the full range of public interests. It is also right to bring forward the review as an undertaking of government by the Government.

In the House, I am used to hearing Members criticising, and alleging, remote-controlled Government. They say that too much of devolution has so far involved establishing reviews rather than people getting on with the job of government itself. Members have said that when reviews have been established, those reviews have been at arm's length to ensure that they are “politically disownable” and that, when the outcomes of the reviews have emerged, they, in turn, have been the subject of yet more reviews and more consultation.

People have criticised reviews that were carried out by that type of remote-control method. Now there is criticism of the type of review that touches issues right across the Government. We want to ensure that the centre of gravity for the review, and the responsibility for driving and implementing it, rests with the Government. However, we want to provide not only for full consultation but for real, independent input and insight. People seem to be criticising that as well, and we are only at the start of the pre-consultation period.

Some Members, including Dr Paisley, seem to have assumed that we knew all the answers before we heard the views of Members or Committees. One criticism that we have had to date is that we have not given a complete account of what the outcome will be or the full details, structure and methodology of the review. We are in a genuine pre-consultation exercise, and I think it is a bit rich for people to throw that criticism at us.

We have not yet launched the review, although we are still on target to launch it in the spring of this year. When we seek the Assembly's endorsement of the terms of reference we will be clear about it, and I hope that many Members will have a clearer understanding of many of the issues that have been raised than the understanding they have displayed today.

The timescale, which will include milestones, and the budget for the review will be set out alongside the fuller role that we envisage for independent experts. We must underline that those issues all require the Executive's approval. They will not be decided at the whim of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. It would not be right for me to pre-empt that process, despite being pressed by many Members and personally tempted to do so. That process will involve the Executive's giving full consideration to the feedback that they receive from Committees and the views they have heard from Members.

I listened to all the views that were expressed. The First Minister and I, together with the other Ministers in the Executive, will consider them carefully. I wonder whether some Members listened carefully to some of the things they said today, because there seemed to be contradictions in some of the contributions.

We will consult other groups, including unions, representatives of local government and the wider public sector, and we will take their views into account. Consultation must, and will, be a major feature of the review once it gets under way.

It is clear from the debate that Members have grasped the scale of the task ahead and the complexity of the issues to be addressed. With a rigorous examination of all the issues and options, and through a highly consultative and participative approach, we will try to build a consensus — yes, a consensus — for the type of change

that is required, and we will arrive at well-informed decisions that will bring real benefits to all.

Some Members asked about issues that ought to be included in the review. Some people seemed to suggest that the review should be able to question some of the principles or structures in the Good Friday Agreement. If we are to conduct the review with a view to maximising consensus, we must recognise first that public administration, the issues that we are dealing with and the 30-year-old structures that we have inherited are different from the matters that were addressed by the principles and structures of the Good Friday Agreement.

We must recognise also that to try to include the issues from the Good Friday Agreement would probably place more hurdles on the road to consensus than would trying to concentrate on the actual review of public administration.

5.30 pm

The Executive might also consider what Members are saying about fundamentally questioning the number of existing Departments. Would it really offer the Assembly the opportunity to have a telling and cogent impact on the review of public administration if Committees felt that they were spending more time defending the existence of the relevant Departments and trying to deal with that type of "turf" consideration and positioning rather than examining the issues of public administration beyond the Assembly and the Departments?

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The decisions that emerge from the review will have implications for the functions of Departments. There are provisions in the legislation that allow Departments to be changed and functions to be transferred, and for the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to bring forward proposals for a different dispensation regarding departmental structures. That provision will always exist. The Assembly does not necessarily have to fix Departments for a generation in the same way as it might fix overall structures of public administration for a generation. Members must be careful that they do not confuse matters.

Many Members seem to be expressing more concern about the conclusion of the review than they did about its start. There have been complaints about the delay in getting the review started, about what is or is not going to happen during the review, and questions about what will happen at the end of it. People seem to be fearful that the review will be carried out in camera, with surprises coming at the end. There should be no surprises lurking in any conclusions that emerge. The Executive want to ensure widespread public debate of the issues, which includes ongoing debate in the House and in Committees. We are encouraged by the

level of interest shown by the public in the limited consultation on the terms of reference. We hope that public interest and involvement develop as the review starts to examine the substantive issues that need to be addressed. Many Members mentioned many of those issues today.

A key message to take away from the debate is that the review will be an open and transparent process. That is not just a standard of the Alliance Party. It has to be an open and transparent process, which will require the Assembly and the Executive to work in partnership to the benefit of everyone. Whatever the outcome of the review, it must have the support of the Assembly to see it through to a successful and durable implementation. That is why it is so important that the Assembly be involved at every stage.

It is also important that there is a responsible and consistent approach to the review by elected representatives and political parties. It is easy for representatives of the same party to lobby for two or three conflicting outcomes. There were examples of that in the debate, depending on which hat a Member happened to be wearing at the time. If a Member supports the rationalisation of councils, while at the same time members of his party call for the maintenance of the councils of which they are a part, clearly there are problems with credibility and consistency.

Any Member can play games with such a complex review. However, to do so — consciously or otherwise — is to undermine the capacity for consensus and change. It will add to the confusion and will contribute to a delay in achieving success in a review to which all Members say they attach great urgency and importance.

Together, the Executive and the Assembly have a responsibility to provide clear leadership and good government. In an exercise of this scale we shall be unable to please everyone — we shall not even be able to please everyone in the Chamber. There will be difficult decisions ahead, but they must be made.

The Executive cannot shirk their responsibility. People want to know that they have a Government in the Executive and the Assembly and not a Government-in-waiting. That is why we must proceed with the review in a timely and honest manner. Had we opted for the more hands-off review that some suggested, we would have been attacked for not providing leadership and for not offering clear Executive ownership of an important exercise that will affect government for some time.

The Assembly's interests must also be balanced with the expectations of the wider community. For that reason, we are developing a process that will allow feedback from a broad range of stakeholders on issues as they emerge and develop. It must be remembered that the nature of the review means that issues will emerge and develop. It is wrong for Members to think

that everything in the review has been precast in an inflexible and unresponsive way. The review must be structured so that it can absorb and reflect all the issues and tensions that will arise.

Several Members, including William McCrea and Duncan Shipley Dalton, made two distinct points. First, they asked that we move ahead quickly with the review and that the outcomes are produced and implemented speedily. Secondly, they asked us to look more fundamentally at how the functions of the 11 Departments are to be allocated. In many ways, those two points contradict each other.

Other Members argued that more matters must be brought into the review. It was also argued that several other issues, which are already under review, should be included to make a composite or omnibus review. If we include everything in the review of public administration, it will take longer to conduct.

Not for the first time, Seamus Close referred to putting things into the wheelbarrow and wheeling them in front of you. However, lo and behold, he wanted the review of rating policy, the review of office accommodation and the various other reviews to go into that wheelbarrow. He also denounced those reviews for having already been started. Those reviews are commitments in the Programme for Government and are taking place on time in keeping with the programme. At the same time, Mr Close attacked the supposed delay in the review of public administration. A little consistency would perhaps take us further and could mean that there might be less in the wheelbarrow.

I shall turn to the scope of the review and how Government Departments will be dealt with. The basis of the present system of public administration was laid down in the early 1970s. The departmental structure of the Assembly was agreed in 1998, although devolution only came into effect at the end of 1999. Devolution has existed for only two years — not even two full years, due to suspensions and other disruptions, such as having only an acting First Minister and an acting Deputy First Minister for four months last year.

The Assembly's departmental structure was agreed without reflecting at all on the structure of public administration outside the Assembly. What we are talking about now is a review of arrangements that are 30 years old. Many Members reflected on today's different circumstances and conditions and gave their own perceptions and experiences of those earlier structures. The departmental structure is not set in stone; it can be changed and adapted, and not just from Assembly to Assembly. Under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister can propose changes to the structure.

I was particularly intrigued to hear the valiant plea by some DUP Members for reorganisation of Departments

and transfer of functions. I daresay that if the First Minister and I came forward with such proposals, those who are now demanding them would be the first to cry "Foul" and say that they were politically rigged and that we were somehow engaged in drive-by political sanctions against some Departments.

The Patten Report and the criminal justice review derived from the agreement, and both envisaged devolution of justice functions. Given that the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the agreement specify that there cannot be more than 10 Departments, those parameters would require an adjustment to be made in any case. That can be taken in our stride. In Westminster, in Dublin and everywhere else, Government Departments can be changed and restructured relatively easily, without the consequent reduction and the need for phasing and dealing with other issues as clearly applies in the review of public administration. I see no need to weigh the review down with any task not germane to its purpose.

I take the point from Seamus Close and other Members that the review should focus on the citizen; the more we in the Chamber focus on Departments, the less sure I am that that will happen. We must make sure that we address people's rightful interests and demands regarding service, rather than structures.

There are no predetermined outcomes. The objective must be to create the best possible system of public administration. It is not about cutting jobs. It is about the delivery of public services and the legacy we want to leave to future generations.

In the context of devolution and our newly established institutions, it is necessary to make changes to the current system to reflect the new dispensation. On the evidence of today's debate, there is no dispute about that. We must move forward with a modern system that lives up to our expectations and meets all our requirements.

That may mean new ways of working and new ways of thinking about how services are delivered. Tommy Gallagher referred to partnership. A key theme of this Administration is partnership between the customer and the service provider, between local and regional levels of government and between the Government and the community.

In examining the ways in which services are administered, we will be keen to consider new methods of working, including the development of partnerships at local levels as well as those between different levels of government. One dimension of that is the fairly recent establishment in many localities of partnership boards or local strategic partnerships. Those relate to local government, the public sector and the community in a variety of ways. It may have been some of these that Sammy Wilson referred to in his remarks.

Francie Molloy said that some arrangements have grown up with European programmes. The review should examine whether mechanisms from those and other arrangements could provide potential opportunities for the future here. We must look not just at how delivery of public services can be improved, but also at how we can assure appropriate local accountability for those services. Local delivery is one issue, and local accountability is another.

5.45 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre raised the issue of the oversight of the review. We have made clear that it is a matter for the Assembly. That is why we called for a pre-consultation debate and wrote to the Committees and to you, Mr Speaker. We are happy to work with what the Assembly decides should be the form, strength and nature of its engagement with the process.

We want to have a positive relationship with the relevant Committee and we recognise that all Committees have a part to play. William McCrea also commented on the role of Committees. However, I thought that I was partaking in a different debate when he suggested that Committees were being relegated to the end of the line. Given that the Committees were consulted first, I am unsure as to how he came to that conclusion.

In fairness to the First Minister and me, we raised the issue of how the Assembly would oversee the review with the Speaker. We indicated that, because of the Assembly's central role, we look forward to working with its Committees. That must be reflected in the way in which the review is conducted. Several Committee Chairpersons have registered the need to involve their Committees in the work of the review at every stage, and that was reflected in the comments of several Chairpersons and others who spoke from a Committee perspective.

We want to be responsive. However, if 11 Committees hold the review team to account, it may diminish the role of the Assembly. Therefore, we must find a way to allow all Committees to express their views clearly and strongly. However, we must ensure that those views are harnessed in a sensible and structured way. Sensible approaches that provide clear accountability, without the risk of confusion or undue contention among Committees, must be found.

That is why we propose a similar approach to that which the Assembly and the Committees use to handle the Budget considerations. Each Committee is to put forward its responses and views, but one Committee will take overriding responsibility for reflecting those views to the Assembly. The indications are that the Committee of the Centre believes that it should pursue that role.

Several Members emphasised that the Committee of the Centre must have a strong hand in the review. Some Members who advocated that also said that the review should be independent and criticised the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister's having a central role in it. That is inconsistent.

Edwin Poots asked about the nature of the review. It is an overall review that must look at specific areas such as local government, the different quangos and the different sectoral footprints that are involved. However, it must do that as a coherent whole. Other reviews will dovetail with it, but we must be clear that we seek a single, coherent, initial model for public administration that is capable of looking at service delivery across the sectors.

Other reviews were mentioned. I reassure Alex Maskey, who cannot be here as he is visiting someone in hospital, and Tommy Gallagher that the review of public administration will not delay progress in other areas.

It has been suggested, here and elsewhere, that the delay of the review of public administration or the way in which the process is conducted is holding up the implementation of the structural proposals in the Hayes Report and the Burns Report. In fairness, the Executive have yet to receive, let alone agree or defer, proposals for structural reform from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety or the Minister of Education, following the independent Hayes and Burns reviews.

Those reviews were the subject of lengthy consultation. Many critics of those reviews and their lengthy consultation periods seem to be asking us to conduct the review of public administration in a similar manner. The Executive decided that in all reviews that are consistent with the mandate in the Programme for Government it would not be the case that nothing can be agreed until everything is agreed. Reforms can progress, as illustrated by the establishment of Invest Northern Ireland. Other reviews are progressing. Some of the points that emerge from those reviews must be taken into account, and there must be cross-referral between the themes that emerge from the review of public administration and other reviews. However, there should not be gridlock.

We must take decisions in a responsible and co-ordinated fashion. It is a two-way process in which different review teams can take account of one another's findings. Some of the reviews that the Department of Finance and Personnel has carried out were mentioned. It was implied that the senior Civil Service review, the office accommodation review and the rating policy review should all now be put on hold or incorporated into the review of public administration. To do that would be to lose sight of the fact that there are important discrete issues that must be dealt with on

their own terms and merits in separate reviews. The thinking and understanding that develops as a result of those reviews will inform other aspects of the review of public administration and vice versa. However, we will not aid progress in any of those areas if we merge reviews or if other reviews were to be subsumed by the review of public administration.

I do not think that Members believe that an alternative approach would be sustainable. We must ensure that when Departments are carrying out reviews, they have regard to what emerges from the review of public administration. We cannot improve the public sector as a whole or public administration as a service if 11 different Departments are making their own decisions separately. Equally, the "big bang" approach to public sector reform, whereby everything is changed at once, is not achievable.

Equality proofing was mentioned. The duty to promote equality of opportunity will be taken into account at all stages of the review. We will consider carefully how to assess the equality impact of recommendations. We must consult before we take decisions.

Some Members drew attention to the characteristics in the terms of reference. Mr O'Neill focused on the importance of TSN principles in this review and their relevance to the issue of public access to services. That issue goes beyond the structure of services by focusing on delivery. Mr Molloy and others also raised similar issues that we must consider.

Several Members mentioned the idea of appointing an independent commission to carry out the review. Some of those people are the same ones who criticised the effect of other independent reviews and viewed them as government by the long finger. I will leave Members to square their thoughts on that.

Many Members have asked who the experts will be and whom we will appoint. Some Members seem to be questioning the appointment of independent experts as advisers, while at the same time championing the idea of having an entirely independent commission to run and manage the review — and that commission will have to be appointed by somebody.

We have identified two types of experts that we would like to appoint as advisers, although we have not yet identified the individuals. There will be one group of high-level experts who will act as key mentors and monitors of the process and will help to quality assure it. Those are people who are seen to be heavy hitters in the public administration field, but we recognise that they will not be able to devote their time in a direct and hands-on way over the lifetime of this project. However, they can play an important role in mentoring and monitoring the process. The other group of experts are people with particular sectoral expertise, based on their professional experience, their

academic insight or their background. We want to ensure that we can get all the necessary insights, and those insights will be made available not only to the core team that will be working full time on the review, but to others as well. That core team will comprise not only civil servants but also people drawn from a range of professions across the public sector — indeed, the team does not have to be confined to the public sector. I want to underline that point, because some people seem to be caricaturing the review as an inside job when that is not the case.

Several points were made that were not germane. Mr McCartney reprised his contribution to the debate on estimates in the hope that I would answer because he felt he did not get an answer then. I addressed most of Mr McCartney's points when I was Minister of Finance and Personnel, and I refer him to those responses.

Some Members raised issues related to local government. Mr Gallagher asked how local government units would identify with communities, and that is an issue that must be addressed. Some Committees will also address that issue, and Dr McCrea indicated that that would be one area, but not the only area, in which the Committee for the Environment would be taking an interest.

I will not be able to cover all the issues that were raised in the time remaining. However, we will correspond with Members on those matters. I hope that we will be able to take some of those issues on board in further work on the terms of reference and in future layouts for the review. I welcome the fact that, while many people mentioned the perceived delay in the review and asked questions about how it will be conducted, there seems to be reasonably widespread support for the proposed terms of reference, although other suggestions were also put forward. Member after Member has drawn attention to specific, important principles in the

document. They are in there; Members identified few principles that are not covered in the paper.

6.00 pm

We shall carefully review the specific changes that people have been canvassing, alongside the views from Committees. I recognise that some issues about process have been raised, and I indicated in my opening remarks that we shall provide more information shortly. However, notwithstanding that some Members want it all ways — or certainly more than one way — it is clear that some want the review done quickly, but at the same time want its remit extended. They want the review to be independent, but at the same time want the Executive seen to be adopting a hands-on role while doing our own job in Government. Some Members want us to maintain independence by appointing commissions, while criticising similar structured reviews in other arenas and in other veins.

I recognise that there will be an amount of political exchange and badinage in relation to this exercise, as there is in everything else. We can take that as part of the loose change of the whole exercise. However, we must remember that the important currency of the exercise must be those important principles that are laid out in the paper and that many Members rehearsed. If we stick to the agenda that many Members emphasised when setting out what they regarded to be the key principles, we as an Assembly, and not only the Executive, will be providing a good service to the region for at least a generation to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the proposed Terms of Reference for the Review of Public Administration.

Adjourned at 6.02 pm

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 26 February 2002

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

WASTEWATER TREATMENT WORKS

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Regional Development that he wishes to make a statement on wastewater treatment works.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): Thank you for the opportunity to make a statement on the siting of the new wastewater treatment works for north Down and Ards.

I am aware of the concerns in the local communities of north Down and Ards about the siting of the project. Many public representatives have raised the matter with me, and I have answered many questions in the Assembly. The subject is of considerable interest to Members and the general population in north Down and Ards, and it is important that I advise the Assembly of my decision. I thought it more appropriate to give Members an opportunity to comment, rather than simply sneak out a statement.

No one can dispute the need for a wastewater treatment works. Many Members and, indeed, the public may be surprised to know that at present wastewater from Bangor, Donaghadee and Millisle is largely untreated. It is simply pumped out to sea after what Water Service engineers describe as coarse screening. I shall not go into too many details of what that involves — I will leave it to hon Members' imaginations.

This method has been the traditional way of disposing of wastewater from coastal towns throughout the UK for the past 100 years and is in line with a report prepared by a Royal Commission in 1912. Everyone will agree that it is not acceptable in the twenty-first century. The public rightly expects us to do all we can to protect the environment and our beaches. That means that we must effectively treat wastewater before we discharge it to the sea.

We must also have regard to the European Union Directive on wastewater treatment. That Directive was transposed into our local law by the Urban wastewater

Treatment Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995. Those Regulations oblige us to provide treatment for all wastewater discharges. The Environment and Heritage Service determines the discharge standard.

We should have provided the required treatment at Bangor and Donaghadee by 31 December 2000. We have until 31 December 2005 to provide it at Millisle. We are thus in breach of the Regulations and the Directive. We are already at risk of infraction proceedings by the European Union, in relation not only to Bangor but also to many other towns in Northern Ireland. That sorry position is the direct result of many years of underfunding of water and sewerage services by previous Administrations. I make no apology for having to say that, but we are paying a heavy price for years of neglect.

I will want to come back at a later date on how we might best meet the huge investment needs — in the order of £3 billion over a 20-year period — that we are facing. In fairness to the Water Service, it has been seeking for the best part of the past 10 years to prepare for the requirements of the EU Directive.

The original proposal was for Bangor to be served by a new wastewater treatment works located close to the present sea outfall near Groomsport. Three possible sites were initially identified, and planning approval was obtained for one of the sites. However, the scheme was being progressed by way of a private finance initiative, and the transfer of planning approval to a private operator, together with the land acquisition process, meant that the proposal was likely to be subject to a public inquiry. After further evaluation against planning and environmental criteria, it was apparent that the site selection process that was followed was insufficiently detailed to support the proposal.

Therefore a decision was taken to return to a clean sheet of paper and start all over again. Consulting engineers were appointed in December 1997. They were asked to consider alternative strategies for wastewater treatment in the whole north Down and Ards area. They were also asked to identify and assess possible locations for the treatment facilities.

The consultants' appraisal study report was made public in March 1999. It recommended that the best strategic option was a single treatment works to serve Bangor, Donaghadee and Millisle. The works was to have the flexibility to accommodate wastewater from part, or all, of Newtownards at a future date.

The recommendation was audited by an independent firm of GB-based consulting engineers who are acknowledged leaders in the public health field. Their audit confirmed that the provision of a single treatment works for the north Down and Ards area was the best option.

Fourteen possible sites were initially identified for the new works, including two of the three original

sites close to Groomsport. Four were shortlisted, using detailed technical and environmental sifting criteria. Following further rigorous assessment, the two most suitable sites were identified. One is on the outskirts of Donaghadee, adjacent to the carpet factory. The other is halfway between Donaghadee and Newtownards, at Dead Man's Island.

Detailed assessments have been made of the environmental impact that the proposed works would have on each site. The assessments have identified measures to mitigate those impacts. The Water Service recognises all too well the public's negative image of wastewater treatment works. They are almost universally considered to be noisy, smelly and best avoided. That image is unfortunate. It is largely based on the public's experience of older works, which are often overloaded. Modern works are designed to be good neighbours and to not cause a nuisance.

The Water Service has taken forward the selection and evaluation process in an open and informative way. Consultation has included meetings with, and presentations to, Ards Borough Council and North Down Borough Council; presentations to local Assembly Members; information leaflets issued to all local public representatives and delivered to all households within a two-kilometre radius of the two proposed sites; written consultations with a wide range of both statutory and non-statutory bodies; and meetings with, and presentations to, local interest groups.

My predecessor, Gregory Campbell, was anxious that there should be an awareness of what a truly modern wastewater treatment works looks like and how it operates. Last February he led a delegation of local public representatives, council officials and the press to visit two modern wastewater treatment works at Eastbourne and Little Hampton in Sussex. I understand that all were impressed by how a well-designed modern treatment works can be a good neighbour to the community and not cause any nuisance.

He also invited both councils to take part in a working group to review the site selection and appraisal procedure used by the Water Service and its consultants. The councils accepted the invitation, and the working group met on several occasions. Unfortunately, there was no agreement on how the review should be carried out, and it was not possible to reach any conclusions.

Since resuming ministerial office in October, I have been aware of the need to make progress on this matter, given the pressures that we are facing. I visited the two preferred sites and considered all the reports and appraisals that had been prepared on where the new works should be sited. Those included a detailed comparison of the merits of the two shortlisted sites. That comparator report recommended clearly that the site adjacent to the carpet factory was the more

suitable, taking account of all environmental, technical and economic issues.

I am satisfied that the evaluation of the sites has been carried out in a comprehensive, impartial and professional manner. I am also fully satisfied that all relevant issues have been considered and evaluated. In addition, I have borne in mind the representations made by elected representatives and members of the local community about the siting of the works.

I have been particularly conscious of the strong representations from Ards Borough Council that the wastewater from Bangor should be treated in North Down Borough Council's area and not transferred to the Ards area for treatment. I cannot accept that argument. It is not in line with past and current practice in Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. There can be no justification, on technical or other grounds, for basing wastewater treatment on local government or Assembly constituency boundaries. A decision on the siting of any works must be made on the basis of environmental, technical and economic factors, taking account of the drainage needs of the area.

The two preferred sites are in Ards Borough Council's area. They are also both in the North Down constituency, but I am not giving that as a reason for their selection. Having considered all the issues and the recommendation of the chief executive and board of the Water Service, I have decided that the new works should be located adjacent to the Donaghadee carpet factory.

Considerable care has been put into the design of the new works to take account of the concerns of local residents about its impact on their neighbourhood. A leaflet, which is available to Assembly Members, gives an illustration of the works and describes what will be involved in the project. It demonstrates the high quality design and care that will go into the construction of the works, which will be housed in an enclosed building. It will be designed to a high architectural standard and use the most modern technology available to minimise odour and noise levels. Sensitive landscaping will further enhance the appearance of the site. It is estimated that it will cost £35 million to build the new works and about £1.6 million to run it each year. Pumping stations will have to be built at Donaghadee, Millisle and Briggs Rock near Groomsport and will be mainly underground. The treated effluent will be discharged into the sea off Briggs Rock.

I referred earlier to the investment needs of the Water Service. The sum of £35 million is a very significant amount of money, and if we are to finance this from public expenditure, many other pressing projects will have to be deferred. We are, therefore, investigating whether it will be possible to use private finance to build and operate this and other new

wastewater treatment works. However, it is likely to be some time before we can reach a decision on that. We will have to obtain planning approval from the Planning Service before we can start, and we expect to submit the planning application during April. The site is in private ownership, and initial land acquisition procedures will commence in the near future.

The planning approval, land acquisition and project procurement procedure will be complex and lengthy. Subject to satisfactory progress on all those fronts, I expect construction work to commence in 2005. It will take two years to build the new works.

10.45 am

In conclusion, I wish to stress that this decision was taken only after a lengthy and in-depth investigation and evaluation of options. Extensive consultation also took place with local public representatives, district councils and local residents. I am satisfied that the site selected is the most suitable. The new works will protect and enhance the marine environment. The site will benefit the local communities and make the entire area more attractive for tourists. It will also cater for new investment and growth in the area. Not least, it will enable us to meet our statutory obligations for wastewater treatment. The new works represent a significant investment in the area and reinforce my commitment to upgrading wastewater treatment facilities throughout Northern Ireland. They provide the public with the level of services and facilities that they rightly expect.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr A Maginness): I thank the Minister for his comprehensive and thorough statement. I welcome his decision on the establishment of a wastewater works in north Down. As Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, I cannot express a view on the site, which the Minister has chosen after considerable advice and consultation. However, I welcome the Department's attempt to remedy the continuing breach of the European Directive and the Regulations that govern wastewater treatment.

The Minister will present an application to the planning authorities in April. Can he tell the House whether that application will be subject to a public inquiry, or will it simply go through the ordinary planning process? In addition, I express my concern, which I presume is shared by the Committee, at the unavailability of the £35 million to finance the project. Can the Minister tell the House whether a private finance initiative or other private initiative has been found to fund the project?

Mr P Robinson: The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development is right to point to a general deficit in funding for water services. That is a matter that has exercised my officials considerably. A series of proposals to draw in private finance, which we wish

to share with the Chairperson and the Committee, are at an advanced stage. Those proposals will assist us with our legal commitments through the European Union. The majority of sites that face infraction proceedings in the United Kingdom are in Northern Ireland, which is a matter of some concern. However, the Member will accept that, in many ways, it is the United Kingdom Government's problem that the matter is on their own doorstep. It is because they did not provide the finance that we are facing the infraction proceedings.

The Member also raised the issue of the merits of a particular site. If the hon Gentleman wants to spend the next week or two reading about the site selection process in more detail, I will allow him to tear away from me the reading that I have had to do in the past few weeks. I hope that he will enjoy it more than I did. He will see that it was a most robust consideration, which took into account all the possible factors.

Planning will be a matter for the Department of the Environment's Planning Service. It will determine whether a public inquiry is necessary. The Department for Regional Development will be happy to defend its case at a public hearing. We believe that the evidence is there to support the decision that the Department has reached.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr McFarland): I wish to express some concern. The Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee and I were kindly given advance copies of the Minister's statement last night. However, a copy had not been placed in my pigeonhole until about 10 minutes before the debate began. It is my understanding that statements should be available one hour before a debate begins.

Minister Campbell took the Committee for Regional Development to England to visit state-of-the-art wastewater treatment works. On the Committee's return, there were discussions about the works, and my understanding was that additional sites in the area of Dead Man's Island were being examined, because there was concern about, and opposition to, the carpet factory site in Donaghadee. How have we returned so rapidly to the carpet factory site when there was so much local feeling about it? Has there been consultation with local people, because the map and the photograph are not accurate? A housing development now comes out just to the right of the carpet factory. The wonderful map shows no housing anywhere near the factory site, and that is a great concern.

Will the Minister give his assurance that the state-of-the-art wastewater treatment works will not be the same as the private finance wastewater treatment works in Holywood, which has as strong an odour emanating from it as the previous treatment works had. The new works was supposed to prevent those

odours. We could be heading for another problem if the wastewater treatment works is constructed in a built-up area beside houses and gives off as strong an odour as the treatment works in Hollywood does.

Mr P Robinson: The last question asked by the Member was also answered by him. My Colleague Gregory Campbell took a delegation to see what a modern state-of-the-art wastewater treatment works can do, and how it can live with the local community. The Eastbourne wastewater treatment works is sited in a tourist area on the coast, but visitors to the area have to ask what it is, because there is no other signal, such as an odour, to indicate that it is a wastewater treatment works.

It may take quite a long time to answer the question of site selection procedure, but it is important for everyone that I do so. In the Department's deliberations on where the wastewater treatment works should be sited, the potential catchment area had to be considered. That then became the search area, which was sizeable. Various parts of that area were sifted for planning criteria. For example, if a certain part was in an area of outstanding natural beauty, a special scientific area, an industrially zoned area or an urban area, it was sifted out. Another sifting took place in relation to height, and any area that was over 50 metres OD (ordnance datum) was taken out. That still left a large area, and a further sifting exercise took place, which reduced the potential location to 14 sites. Those sites were then examined individually and a matrix was constructed for scoring purposes. That process reduced the potential location to four sites. A more detailed investigation examined the full impact on each of those sites. A scoring mechanism was again employed, which reduced it to two sites.

I have reviewed the decision taken by the direct rule Minister with regard to the information that he would have had available to him, and I would not do anything differently. I am not saying that to wash my hands of the matter, but at that point devolution took place and the decision had to be made between Dead Man's Island and the carpet factory site. That was the choice.

Both sites are in the Ards Borough Council area, and both are in the North Down constituency. I suspect that I shall be attacked by North Down Assembly Members and by Members who have responsibilities outside of the House as members of Ards Borough Council. That will come as a double whammy rather than save me from attack.

On nearly every heading on which the investigation took place between the two sites that were left during devolution, the carpet factory proved the better site. I ask the hon Member to look at the drawing of Donaghadee and tell me which factor has the greatest adverse impact on the environment and the local community.

Given the existing features, there is no doubt that the carpet factory is more detrimental to the environment than the site that we propose to put there instead. As far as housing is concerned, I visited both the sites. The Dead Man's Island site and its surrounds would have affected more houses directly and would have also affected jobs.

We shall never obtain the ideal site for a wastewater treatment works, as, by its nature, people are turned off by the proposition. However, the community needs a wastewater treatment works. If we do not start the process immediately, we shall almost certainly face infraction proceedings, as we are already outside the time limit. Those are the facts. Given the choice that was available, I have chosen on the basis of professional opinion.

Mr Shannon: Although I welcome the necessary investment in infrastructure, £35 million is a substantial amount of money. Is the Minister aware of the deep-seated concern and high degree of consternation that has been generated? That concern is felt especially by those who live in Donaghadee, as well as by those on Ards Borough Council, of which I am a member, as are two other Members in the Chamber.

In the light of the announcement, and the very real concern that it has generated, is the Minister prepared to meet a deputation from Ards Borough Council, or, better still, to meet with the council, at his earliest convenience, so that outstanding matters of concern can be further examined and fully explored?

Mr McCarthy: The Minister would not be welcome.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: We can see the rationality of some Ards Borough Council members in the Chamber.

I am aware of the main concern of people in Donaghadee and, indeed, of the council, as was my predecessor, who met with Ards Borough Council on the issue. I am happy to receive a deputation from the council, to go over the selection proceedings and to make my expert advisers available. Moreover, if Donaghadee has a residents' group, I am happy to offer it the same advantage as some council officials and Members have had, by letting the group see what a modern wastewater treatment works is like. The residents' group would then be better informed, even if it is only about the planning application case that it may wish to put forward. However, at least it will be better informed about what we are talking about, rather than having to judge it against other wastewater treatment works in the Province. I am happy to take those issues on board.

Even though I do not agree with the council's approach, I understand the suggestion that wastewater treatment works should conform to local government boundaries. However, that is not a factor, and, with the

review of administration, the North Down constituency and Ards Borough Council could even find themselves in the one area. Therefore, the issue would no longer be a problem for local government.

11.00 am

The bottom line is that the factors that led to the decision are of a professional nature, taking into account environmental, topographical and all other issues relating to planning. Those factors, rather than local government administrative boundaries, must be the key to a judgement on which site is appropriate.

Mrs E Bell: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement. Far from attacking him, credit should be given to him and his predecessor for expediting this complex and sensitive process, which has taken some years.

The statement is almost as long as the process it outlines. Mr McFarland rightly said that the issue must be examined carefully. I would like to be objective about the matter, and, in a way, the Minister has pre-empted my question. The glossy leaflet is wonderful, but the Minister knows as well as I do that residents will not be taken in by it. They will be very concerned. Has the decision been made known to the residents directly affected? If not, when and how will it be made public? Many residents will be keen to obtain specific reasons for the decision. That would help in the subsequent planning process, because residents may seek a public inquiry. Although we are glad that the decision has been made, we are concerned that from the residents' subjective viewpoint, it may not be the right one.

Mr P Robinson: I warmly welcome Mrs Bell's opening remarks. I assure her that the purpose of the leaflet is not to deceive residents — it is to inform them. It is being widely distributed, and briefings are taking place so that full information is available to the local press. There will be a display in Donaghadee. Ards Borough Council has been asked to make premises available, but I do not know whether it has agreed yet. The Alliance Party Member for Strangford states that the council does not want residents to be informed, but I hope that the council will consider it important that residents be informed on these issues and will allow its facilities to be used.

Mr O'Neill: I welcome the announcement as a major step towards eliminating sewage pollution from the environment.

I note the Minister's commitment to upgrade wastewater treatment facilities in paragraph 32 of the statement and his concern, in paragraph 6, about infraction proceedings by the EU in relation to many other towns in Northern Ireland. I note the comment in paragraph 15 on wastewater treatment works being designated as good neighbours and not causing a nuisance. Why

then does the Minister continue to renege on the promised upgrading of the Newcastle treatment works? It has a direct impact on our tourist economy due to sea-water pollution and odour, which affect residents and tourists.

Mr P Robinson: Mr O'Neill is tempting me to go beyond the statement. However, I know that you, Mr Speaker, would call me to order if I were to do so. I am content to meet with the hon Member at any time. If he wants to bring a deputation, we can deal with the matter in more detail. Today's business, Members will agree, must focus on the North Down/Ards treatment works.

Mr Weir: I join in the happiness expressed by Mrs Bell that we have an announcement at last. That will give some happiness to people in the Donaghadee area. However, I suspect that that is where their happiness will end.

I will deal with Mr McFarland's point. Why was an out-of-date map included in the leaflet? Why was Dead Man's Island not picked? It is sparsely populated compared with the much more congested Donaghadee area. Given that a large amount of growth is expected in the Newtownards area — approximately 7,000 houses are to be built in the next 10 years — and that more sewage will be pumped from there, why was a site at the far side of the peninsula chosen rather than Dead Man's Island, which is closer to the centre of Newtownards? Unlike one of the Members for Strangford, I prefer that the fullest information be provided to the residents of Donaghadee. Can the Minister say what consultations his Department intends to arrange to explain to those residents what is being proposed for the town?

Mr P Robinson: The hon Member will see from the documentation that careful consideration was given to the sieving and scoring processes used to choose between the two sites. We used the best Ordnance Survey map available. Unless the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland updates its map, I cannot take the matter further. I visited the site, and anyone who visits it will see that choosing Dead Man's Island would have had a much greater impact on residents and jobs.

The hon Member should not get the impression that the wastewater treatment works will be a bad neighbour. I do not know if he was part of the delegation that went to Eastbourne, but, if not, he might like to accompany some Donaghadee residents on the next visit. He will see how the treatment works fits into the area and that it is a good neighbour to those who live in houses in the Eastbourne catchment area.

When all the issues that must be considered for wastewater treatment works were considered for Dead Man's Island and the site at the carpet factory, the latter emerged as the better site. I am not technically capable of making that sort of choice myself. I must rely on the

experts available to me. They are not from the Water Service but are consultants with the relevant expertise. Their work was quality assured by GB experts who are the leaders in the field and who looked at the sites too. I cannot second guess people with experience and expertise in this.

If the hon Member is looking for more reading material, I can get him further and better particulars, and I can see he is enthusiastic about that. However, when he reads that material from a professional point of view, he will reach the same conclusion that I did. No site will be popular, and we made the right choice between the two available on technical and economic grounds.

Mr Byrne: It is good that a comprehensive works to cover the three towns has been proposed. How constructive was the dialogue or consultation with Ards and North Down Borough Councils? It is crucial that councils be closely involved in any consultation process, particularly one that deals with the site of a wastewater treatment works. The Minister must agree that in my area Omagh District Council worked constructively with the Department to choose the optimum site.

Mr P Robinson: I suspect that I am not the first Minister to find that it is not always possible to get agreement between people with differing views. I can demonstrate that by saying that representatives from both Ards and North Down Councils went to Eastbourne. There was some unanimity in that each lot felt that the scheme was excellent and would have little impact on the other council's area.

Mr McCarthy: Unlike others, I do not welcome the Minister's statement. This is a disaster for Donaghadee and the Ards Borough Council area. The diagram shows that the building works will be an absolute disaster; a carbuncle on the road beside the carpet factory and an absolute mess in a tourist area.

The Minister and others have welcomed the proposal in defiance of Ards Borough Council, of which I am a member, and which said, time and time again, that the area was not a proper site for a treatment works. The smaller diagram shows that the building of a pumping station has also been proposed. Long before the Minister became involved in this work, the people of Donaghadee and Ards borough fought tooth and nail to prevent the erection of any building adjacent to the marina in Donaghadee. They were totally and absolutely opposed to that.

I fully support the efforts of local Ministers. However, in this case the local Minister has got it wrong. He has not listened to Ards Borough Council. He has not listened to the community in Donaghadee. Ards Borough Council went to considerable expense to employ consultants to consider the 14 sites that he referred to in the document. The council was clearly critical of the sites

which were proposed by the Department for Regional Development. Did the Minister consider Ards Borough Council's consultants' report when he was making his decision?

Mr P Robinson: Those last comments star among the most irrational. I ask any Member who has the diagram to which the hon Gentleman refers in front of him to look at what is proposed in it. The Member suggests that the wastewater treatment works proposed for Donaghadee will be an eyesore. Any person with an eye in his head will see that what is unsightly is not the wastewater treatment works, but the existing carpet factory. I have not heard anything from the Member about that. He turns reality on its head when he suggests that the works will be a carbuncle. Much of the building will be screened by banks and landscaping.

I take more account of what the people of Donaghadee say about the site-specific issues than I do of the approach taken by the hon Gentleman, who suggests that we should work within local government boundaries and that Ards Borough Council should not have a wastewater treatment works within its area. There is no rational reason for proceeding in that way. Millisle and Donaghadee, which will be served by the works, are both in Ards Borough Council's area. North Down is a geographical area, but it is the topographical, environmental and drainage features of the whole catchment area that must be taken into account, not local government boundaries.

I suggest to the Member that if Ards Borough Council's attitude is that it is wrong to have any Water Service provision coming from outside its area, there will not be much coming out of its water taps. According to the hon Gentleman, Ards Borough Council does not want wastewater from the Bangor area, but it is quite happy to get water from other parts of County Down, and that shows that declaring Unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) in Ards is not the answer.

This is not a decision that people in Donaghadee will welcome. However, the choice that arose when I entered office was between two sites, both of which are in Ards Borough Council's area. I challenge the hon Gentleman to say whether, if Donaghadee is the wrong site, Dead Man's Island is the right one? He says it is not. The Member therefore says that there should be no wastewater treatment works and that we should be at risk of infraction proceedings.

11.15 am

The conundrum is this: do we need a wastewater treatment works? The answer from everybody is clearly "Yes". Where will it be situated? The choice was between two sites, both of which were in the Ards Borough Council area. Professional advisers were unanimously, on almost every point of consideration, in favour of

the site adjacent to the carpet factory at Donaghadee. People in Donaghadee may not like that answer, but their concerns will be considerably reduced if they fully realise what a modern, state-of-the-art, up-to-date wastewater treatment works means and how it performs as a good neighbour.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You are aware that I had indicated as an MLA for North Down, one of the affected areas, and as the former Member of Parliament for six years for North Down my intention of speaking. One of your Clerks informed me that you applied the convention that if a Member is not here when the Minister makes his statement he or she will be denied the opportunity to speak. I recognise the Minister's difficulties and that the Nimby factor must be propitiated. Nevertheless, it has not helped to get people to support what has happened and has fed the conspiracist theory that seems to be endemic here that I received absolutely no notification — and I believe that is the situation of many other Members from North Down — of this statement's being made.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has raised a point of order.

Mr McCartney: I have not finished.

Mr Speaker: The Member has raised a point of order, and I will respond to the point of order, not to any politics that may be around in regard to it.

The position is this: for some time past, Members came in after Ministers had made their statements, asked to ask questions, not actually knowing what the Minister had said in the statement because they frequently had not read it; not knowing earlier questions that had been asked of Ministers. When they got their question they frequently walked out afterwards, not waiting to hear what anybody else had said. This was disrespectful to Ministers, disrespectful to the House and was regarded as unacceptable.

It was discussed on several occasions at the Business Committee, and the decision made by the Business Committee was as follows: that it would invite the Speaker to consider that those Members who were not present for the whole of a statement should not take priority over Members who were present for the whole of a statement. Members who were not present for any part of a statement should not be called to ask a question in regard to that statement. That I announced to the House before it was implemented, and I have attempted to implement it properly as the will of the House.

In regard to this statement may I say that from 8.30 this morning the advice that the statement was to be made was being scrolled on the monitors. The Minister requested that from 10.00 this morning the statement be put in the pigeonholes, and that was done. Of

course, I accept that those Members who have chosen not to be represented on the Business Committee may not know that the Minister had advised the Business Committee last week that he wished to make a statement. However, I must say that one cannot have one's cake and eat it. If one chooses not to be present and chooses not to have representation at a Business Committee meeting, then one must accept that there will be some things that one may not be aware of as quickly as other Members. The fact is that the Minister was on his feet for some time; it was not the briefest of statements. Any Member who had come in at any point during the statement would have had an opportunity to ask a question.

If the Member is inviting me to treat one Member or some Members differently from other Members, then I am afraid it will fall on a deaf ear, because I am not prepared to treat any Members of this House differently from how I treat other Members. I will do my best to be as equal as I can to all — and as fair as I can to all.

In his point of order, the Member has made another point to the Minister, and it is for the Minister to decide whether he wishes to address that; not in the question here, because this was a point of order not a question on the statement, but it is for the Minister to decide how to handle what has clearly been a prickly and difficult question.

Mr McFarland: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek clarification. My understanding is that if a Minister is to make a statement, it should be in Members' pigeonholes one hour beforehand. I understand you to say it is half an hour. Is that the rule?

Mr Speaker: No, it is not half an hour. The position is that Ministers are requested to make statements available to the House as soon as is possible for them — and not after the time when they stand up to speak in the House. Some Ministers have made them available an hour before, some half an hour before, and some at the time of the statement. Some errant Ministers have even been found to do it after they speak, but that has quickly been addressed because it is a breach of Standing Orders. Some Ministers have made statements available longer in advance, but the requirements of Standing Orders are that they be made available not later than the time when the Minister stands up to speak. As far as I can understand and see, that was entirely fulfilled, both by the Minister in his request and by the staff who executed the request. I trust that that clarifies the matter for Members.

Mr P Robinson: We have now left the issue, but I am happy to meet with and hear the concerns of the Member for North Down.

RAILWAY SAFETY BILL

Second Stage

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Railway Safety Bill (NIA Bill 3/01) be agreed.

Legislation governing the railways goes back to the 1840s, and much of the legislation still in force today was in place by 1871. Although there have been additions, amendments and repeals, the basic legislation remains Victorian, both in content and concept. Its primary focus is on operation and not on safety. It is concerned mainly with the licensing and empowerment of railway operations. Railway legislation in Northern Ireland was recognised as outdated, but, for many years, the introduction of replacement legislation was not deemed of sufficiently high priority to attract the resources necessary to address it. Presumably it was felt that as railways were under the control of a responsible public sector body they would be operated in a safe manner, irrespective of the legislation's shortcomings. In general, railways in Northern Ireland have had a good safety record. However, following three minor incidents in Northern Ireland in 1998, Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) commissioned a report on rail safety — the A D Little review. A key recommendation of the report, issued in March 2000, was that the legislation should be updated to meet the needs of twenty-first century rail travel in Northern Ireland.

Major rail traffic accidents in England, namely those at Southall, Paddington and, more recently, Hatfield, significantly contributed to a heightened public awareness of rail safety issues. Therefore, I decided to introduce new safety-focused legislation in Northern Ireland.

My objective is to provide a legislative basis for modern, safe travel by railways. The Bill will accomplish that primarily by applying existing health and safety at work legislation to railway operations. It will also introduce new powers to approve new infrastructure and rolling stock, to limit speeds and loads and to improve control over private crossings of railway lines.

Access to general powers in the Health and Safety at Work (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 will also allow us to give effect to future EC Directives that relate to railway safety. Members will be aware that NIR is in the process of ordering 23 new trains, on the assumption that under that legislation the operational safety of that rolling stock must be approved by the Department for Regional Development before it can be introduced to services.

The application of the health and safety at work legislation will introduce the safety case regime for

railways, following the Great Britain model. A safety case is a formal written document that includes information on the operator's activities, organisation, safety management systems and safety measures. The control of railway safety in Great Britain has been criticised. However, no criticism has been directed at the safety case concept. All have related to the failure to implement the system properly. Many critics suggested that such failures were due in part to the fragmented nature of the railway industry in Great Britain. I assure Members that I have no plans to change the integrated nature of our much smaller industry.

The development of a safety case will be heavily dependent on risk assessment, which will identify areas of concern and importance and allow for the provision of detailed information on the extent of identified risks, their quantification and how they will be managed. Risk assessment will also determine any exemptions that may be granted; for example, to heritage operators on the basis of a clear statement of the risks that they face and how they will deal with them.

My officials will work closely with their counterparts in HM Railway Inspectorate (HMRI), which is an agency of the Health and Safety Executive in Great Britain, and the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland. I am glad to report that we have reached an agreement with the Health and Safety Executive whereby the experts in HMRI will act as agents of my Department to ensure that each risk assessment and safety case receives full and independent scrutiny before approval.

At present, the authorities in the Republic of Ireland work in adherence to the same nineteenth century legislation we observe. They are also introducing new railway safety legislation. To facilitate existing cross-border services, my Department is co-operating with the Department of Public Enterprise in Dublin to ensure that legislation in both jurisdictions is compatible. We must be satisfied with the safety of their trains that operate on our track and vice versa.

The Bill will also provide for my Department to make a series of Regulations to deal with private crossings, safety critical works, the approval of works, plant and equipment and safety cases. I intend to introduce most of those Regulations following public consultation as soon as possible after the Bill becomes law. However, the safety case Regulations will require railway operators to prepare, and obtain acceptance of, a detailed safety case before being allowed to operate, or, in most cases, to continue to operate.

The timing of the introduction of the Regulations must be agreed with Northern Ireland Railways (NIR). It will have a great deal of work to do on the preparation of audited safety cases for all its activities and operations. I assure Members that the Department

will continue to urge NIR to complete that work as quickly as is necessary, to deal with the serious issues.

The Bill is largely technical, and its provisions are uncontroversial. My officials have met regularly with NIR, which will be directly affected by the legislation, and which has welcomed the proposals. Meetings have also been held with representatives of heritage operators, who come under the scope of the legislation.

The Bill will not result in substantial costs for NIR. Railway running costs will increase marginally, and, under the current subsidy arrangements, my Department will bear those costs out of resources allocated to it by the Assembly.

In addition to regular consultation with NIR and other local railway operators during the preparation of the Bill, my Department carried out a full public consultation. Last summer, some 600 organisations, interest groups and individuals were consulted. There were relatively few responses — 27 in total — and fewer than half of the comments raised substantive issues.

As a result of the consultation exercise, and at the request of NIR, I made one change to the Bill to improve safety at private crossings of railway lines. Schedule 1, which deals with signs and barriers at private crossings, has been added to the Bill.

In general, those who responded welcomed the Bill, and I trust that it will receive a similarly warm response from Members.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr A Maginness): I welcome the opportunity to speak about the Bill. As the Minister stated, the Railway Safety Bill is technical. Nonetheless, it is an important piece of legislation, and it has major safety implications for our railway network. Recent rail accidents in Great Britain, and none more so than the fatal accident at the weekend on the track at Sydenham, only serve to reinforce the need for exacting standards of railway safety in Northern Ireland.

I offer the Committee's sympathy to the bereaved family of the construction worker and wish those who were injured a speedy recovery.

11.30 am

Although we have a small railway infrastructure — approximately 240 miles in total — it is critical that our safety standards be as rigorous as those in Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and the rest of Europe. The legislation is timely. We are in the middle of the public consultation process on the regional transportation strategy. It is important that we provide adequate support for the public transport system, including the railway network. The legislation helps to reinforce the message that we are committed to improving the rail network, not

simply by purchasing new trains, but through rigorous safety standards in which we can all have confidence.

The Regional Development Committee is looking forward to considering the legislation and examining in detail the clauses of the Bill. It is committed to conducting a detailed scrutiny, and it intends to consult widely and take evidence from all interested parties. This is the first piece of primary legislation that the Committee will have considered.

The Minister explained that the Bill makes provision for the introduction of secondary legislation on a range of railway safety issues. That is welcome, but was consideration given to drafting a single prescriptive Bill? That approach has been adopted in the Republic of Ireland, and it might be helpful to look at that model. Irrespective of that, I welcome the Minister's commitment to introducing subordinate legislation that will include a public consultation process.

I am aware that the subordinate Regulations will be subject to negative resolution procedures, as prescribed by the Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978. If this is the case — and I hope that the Regional Development Committee will have the opportunity to consider this more closely during the Committee Stage of the Bill — I seek reassurance from the Minister that consultation on the Regulations will be rigorous and transparent.

I also hope that the Committee will be kept fully informed throughout each stage of the consultation process. I am sure that that will be the case, as the Department for Regional Development must be commended for the manner in which it has co-operated with, and assisted, the Committee with all secondary legislation to date.

To return to the Minister's comments, I welcome the fact that the Minister recognises the importance of ensuring that all trains, including those of Iarnród Éireann, satisfy safety standards on Northern Ireland railways, and vice versa. We expect Northern Ireland safety standards to be at least comparable to those of Iarnród Éireann. Will the Minister reassure me that that is the case, and that he will continue to monitor standards in the future?

I welcome the Minister's statement that he has no plans to change the integrated nature of the railways. In Northern Ireland we have an integrated public transport system, which ensures that we do not face the structural problems that have materialised in Great Britain following privatisation. The added difficulty of providing an integrated system when several competing operators are responsible for providing and maintaining the public transport network was particularly noticeable during the Regional Development Committee's recent visit to Europe to look at best practice in public transport.

With the regional development transportation strategy nearing completion, we have the potential to create a much more integrated public transportation network. As the Minister explained, this Bill will require each railway operator to prepare a safety case. The Regional Development Committee looks forward to examining the content and nature of those safety cases in detail.

However, I seek clarification from the Minister on one specific point. In Great Britain, that same approach is already used, but problems arose because the system was not implemented properly. Can the Minister outline how similar problems will be avoided in Northern Ireland?

I am pleased that officials from the Department for Regional Development have reached an agreement with the Health and Safety Executive whereby HM Railway Inspectorate will act as agent to scrutinise and approve each risk assessment and safety case. I seek reassurance from the Minister that that process will be totally independent and that operators will have no right of appeal to the Department. Given that the basis of this legislation is the requirement for railway operators to provide safety cases, it is important that the safety case Regulations be swiftly implemented.

I note the Minister's comments that the safety case Regulations will require Northern Ireland Railways, in particular, to undertake significant work before it prepares a detailed safety case. It is reassuring to note that the Department for Regional Development will be urging Northern Ireland Railways to complete this work as quickly as possible. However, does the Minister have any idea at this stage as to how long that preparatory work will take? Of course, the recent rail accident makes the Northern Ireland Railways safety case even more pressing, and the Regional Development Committee will lend whatever support it can to the speedy introduction of the safety case Regulations.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr McFarland): I welcome the Railway Safety Bill. As Members are aware, it is a result of the A D Little report and the work of the Railways Task Force, which identified several fairly serious safety issues in the railway system in Northern Ireland. I am glad that the Department is starting to address those issues.

However, I wonder why we have not taken this opportunity to completely re-examine the legislation. I understand that this Bill tinkers with the existing legislation, rather than taking a completely fresh view of it. In the Republic, the opportunity was taken to completely re-examine the relevant legislation, and some fairly new elements were introduced to it.

As I understand it, Translink has expressed concern about elements of the Bill. The Department has indicated that it will deal with those elements through Regulations. However, I suspect that when the Committee gets the

opportunity to examine them in more detail, it may want to introduce proper amendments to the primary legislation as it goes through, rather than rely on Regulations to cover those points.

Mrs E Bell: I too welcome the Railway Safety Bill, not only as an Assembly Member, but also as a part-time and regular commuter on the railways. It has always been a real concern for passengers, staff and management that safety has been undermined by low-grade material, both on the lines and in the rolling stock. In the light of the A D Little report, as Mr McFarland said, we hoped that legislation would be introduced to address that — hence this Bill.

We must quickly eradicate all concerns by upgrading the railways after the long years of insufficient attention. I am more than pleased that the Bill is focused on safety, but, like the Committee Chairperson, I would like more information on the secondary legislation. I am not a member of that Committee, but I am sure we will be able to have access to the information.

We are lucky that we have not had the major disasters that have happened in England and in other places. According to the explanatory and financial memorandum, safety cases serve two main purposes:

“to give confidence that the operator has the ability, commitment and resources to properly assess and effectively control risk to the health and safety of staff and the general public: and

to provide comprehensive working documents to provide evidence that the accepted risk control measures and safety management systems have been properly put into place, and continue to operate in the way they were intended.”

Those are both worthy and necessary.

The Bangor to Belfast railway line is one of the most successful projects. However, you would be surprised at the state of the line. Travelling at speed is unsafe, and one of the recent accidents was caused by a train travelling at speed on a deficient part of the line. The carriages are not ideal. The old carriages, which are being replaced as quickly as possible, have unsafe doors. Some of the new carriages also have unsafe doors. Although the doors are deemed to be automatic, they do not always open. The windows in the older carriages are dreadful. The issue of alighting from both types of carriage at stations must be examined. Those are small but important safety measures, and they must be addressed. It is hoped that running and enforcement costs will be met.

Our railway safety record is good, but it should not make us complacent. It is to be hoped that the general concerns will be addressed, and that health and safety at work; new trains; new rolling stock; and signs and barriers at private crossings will be upgraded to twenty-first century standards. We need to keep our railways. I, therefore, support the Bill, and I hope it will be implemented quickly.

In conclusion, I want to take this opportunity to convey my sympathy and that of my party to the family of the young construction worker who died, and to the others who were injured, during the improvement of the Belfast to Bangor railway line.

Mr Byrne: I too welcome the debate, and I commend the Minister on his recent announcement of an £80 million investment in Northern Ireland Railways to purchase modern rolling stock to replace the existing stock, some of which has been in use for the past 30 years. The Department and the Minister have made a significant start to the modernisation of the Northern Ireland rail network, as proposed in the draft regional transportation strategy. That network has suffered considerably from critical underinvestment during the 30 years of direct rule.

Rail safety is central to the modernisation of Northern Ireland's rail network, and it has an important bearing on the successful implementation of the Department's regional transportation strategy. If we are to increase the use of the railways, then the level of public confidence in the network must be raised, particularly given the prospect of the utilisation of private sector investment. People must be reassured that the network is efficient, safe and comfortable, and that all procedures are transparent. I am thankful that Northern Ireland has not experienced rail accidents on the scale of those in Britain, which involved such tragic loss of life, and which prompted the debate on rail safety. There is already a high degree of safety awareness in Northern Ireland Railways. However, the Bill provides us with the opportunity to introduce standardised safety reporting mechanisms.

The Railway Safety Bill does not address many of the safety issues. At this stage it cannot be regarded as a comprehensive piece of legislation that will safeguard passengers and Northern Ireland Railways staff with the necessary statutory safety mechanisms. Translink and Transport 2000 have reservations relating to the legislation, and they have legitimately highlighted shortcomings on key safety issues. Translink and Transport 2000 have used the A D Little report and Lord Cullen's report as benchmarks to judge the contents of the Bill, and the Assembly must do the same.

The A D Little review, with its specific focus on Northern Ireland, conducted a rigorous analysis of rail safety, separating the issue into four main components — safety management assessment, technical assessment, risk assessment and safety culture assessment.

Under these four headings, the report examined a range of competencies and practices within Northern Ireland Railways. It made eight key recommendations with regard to safety management, safety culture, operations, track, signalling, level crossings, structures and so forth, based on shortfalls in the rail network.

11.45 am

Some of those recommendations are reflected in the clauses of the Bill, but many are not addressed. Translink and Transport 2000 have pointed out that this piece of legislation can be viewed only as a framework that must be built on. For example, there is no mention of a safety audit, and there is no proposal for the establishment of standards and how they are to be monitored. Furthermore, the draft Bill does not outline the proposed role of HM Railway Inspectorate, nor does it address safety concerns with regard to the employment of subcontractors or licences for drivers and signalmen.

I also wish to convey my condolences to the family of the man who was killed at the weekend on the Sydenham section of the railway.

Although the Bill is a step in the right direction, there is room for further amendments that would improve the Bill and make it more comprehensive. I also urge the Department for Regional Development to examine the safety legislation in the Republic. Translink have commented on the more substantive nature of railway safety legislation in the South, which provides a regulatory code as opposed to the mere framework proposed in the Bill. The Bill should take greater account of legislation in the Republic, so that we can have, as far as possible, greater co-ordination and consistency of services between Northern Ireland Railways and Iarnród Éireann. I welcome the Minister's comments regarding this matter.

Although I appreciate the Department's intention to address those shortcomings, there is an obvious need for further consideration of the Bill's provision, so that it reflects more fully the recommendations by Lord Cullen and the A D Little report and incorporates the best elements of rail safety in Britain and the Republic. I look forward to addressing those issues during the Bill's Committee Stage, along with my Colleagues in the Committee for Regional Development.

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful to Members for their constructive contributions to the debate, the brevity of which perhaps indicates the non-controversial nature of the legislation. The Assembly and members of the Committee are eager to have safety legislation of the kind that is proposed on the statute book, in order to provide a higher standard of safety for rail users.

Several Members referred to the tragic loss of a young construction worker at the weekend. I wish to express my sympathy to the family of the deceased and express my best wishes for a speedy recovery to the injured workman. I understand that the accident came about when engineering equipment, operated by the construction firm Mowlem's, collided on the track with a stationary piece of equipment owned by Northern Ireland Railways but leased to the firm. This occurred at 4.00 am on Sunday morning. The track had been

handed over to Mowlem's on Friday evening to allow full access for workers at the weekend. No services operated over the weekend. Under the terms of their contract, Mowlem's is responsible for the line during the period that control is handed to the firm, and, as part of the contract, Mowlem's submitted a safety plan covering all aspects of its operation.

The accident remains under investigation, and we must await the outcome before drawing any conclusions. The investigation will focus on the cause of the accident and how it was not prevented by the safety plan that was put forward by the firm. The system is similar to that which will operate under the safety case regime. However, the Northern Ireland Railways safety case, when it is brought into operation, will not cover this type of situation directly. When external contractors are employed, it is their responsibility to operate a safety plan. I have no doubt that the Assembly, and certainly the Committee, will await the outcome of the investigation and will want to consider the matter more fully at that stage.

In his remarks the Committee Chairperson asked if the Department had considered having a single prescriptive Bill. He rightly recognises that this is an enabling Bill, which will empower the Department to introduce a series of subordinate Regulations that will set out the detailed legislative requirements. The subordinate legislation will be largely technical in nature, and none of its contents is likely to prove controversial. It is a long-standing practice that such matters are dealt with in subordinate legislation. For example, that is the approach adopted by the Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978.

There is one particular reason why it is more appropriate to leave the detailed legislation to Regulations made under the Act. We obtained agreement to proceed to this draft Bill in January 2001. Due largely to the need to carry out a formal consultation process, it was not introduced to the Assembly until this month. It is by no means certain that it will be enacted by the summer. Primary legislation is a time-consuming process, and I would not like changes in the legislation that had the potential to improve railway safety to be delayed for the 18 months or so that primary legislation could take. Such amendments could arise from Lord Cullen's report on railway safety and could be introduced much more speedily by subordinate legislation.

My Department will consult on each set of subordinate Regulations, including the amending regulations as they are made. All interested parties will be consulted, and the Assembly Committee — whose role we find crucial — will be able to scrutinise the Regulations in its usual thorough way. I am not proposing a general public consultation on each set of Regulations. When consulting on this Bill, we received only about a dozen substantive responses from the 600 consultees. That

showed that the general public are not that interested in the technicalities of railway safety. They are interested in being assured that rail travel is safe, and that is paramount to us all.

The Chairperson also raised the issue of cross-border enforcement. As I said in my opening remarks, it will be necessary for us to be satisfied about the safety of Irish Rail trains operating on Northern Ireland Railways track. Of course, Irish Rail will be no less eager to ensure the safety of Northern Ireland Railways trains operating on its track. That can be accomplished by mutual recognition of safety certification in accordance with EU legislation.

The Chairperson also asked about the possible timescales for legislation under the Bill. I hope that the Bill will complete its Assembly stages by June or July 2002. Following Royal Assent, it should become law by October or November. Most subordinate legislation will follow almost immediately, subject to public consultation and consultation with the Assembly Committee. The railway (safety case) Regulations will follow as soon as possible, allowing Northern Ireland Railways time to finalise its safety case and have it thoroughly examined.

The Chairperson also raised the issue of the problems encountered in Great Britain due to failure to comply fully with the implementation of the safety case requirements. The safety case system requires independent validation of a case before acceptance and annual auditing of performance. Those will be rigorously enforced. The system provides strong assurances that rail travel will be safe, though I must emphasise that no system can provide absolute certainty in such a complex area.

The Deputy Chairperson asked why we had not gone for completely new legislation. This is, of course, a completely new piece of legislation. It is a new railway regime and does not amend any existing enactment.

I recently visited Jordanstown and spoke with staff and police at the halt and looked at the crossing. The policeman in attendance opened his file to me, and it showed, in the most graphic way, what a railway accident means. That brought home to me the vital importance of safety. We are dealing with very heavy vehicles going at considerable speeds. It is easy to understand the dangers involved, particularly at crossings.

It is incumbent on all elected representatives, and on all of us with responsibility, to ensure that when legislation is introduced, proper procedures are enacted. The responsibility does not stop with me. The Committee and the House have a role. This step that we are taking will considerably add to the safety requirements and ensure that there is a proper focus on safety issues in the railway system in Northern Ireland.

I welcome the comments of Members and look forward to the continuing contact that we will have with the Committee as the legislation moves to the next stage.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Railway Safety Bill (NIA Bill 3/01) be agreed.

PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES (PRESERVED RIGHTS) BILL

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: No amendments to the Bill have been tabled. I therefore propose, by leave of the House, to group the eight clauses of the Bill, followed by the schedule and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Personal Social Services (Preserved Rights) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (BEST VALUE) BILL

Final Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): I beg to move

That the Local Government (Best Value) Bill (NIA Bill 19/00) do now pass.

As Members will know, the Local Government (Best Value) Bill has two main objectives: first, to repeal the existing provision for compulsory competitive tendering of specified council services; and, secondly, to establish a general duty on district councils to make arrangements for continuous improvement in the delivery of their services, having regard to what is tritely called VFM (value for money), namely economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Most importantly, they will also be required to consult local people on this matter. That is the essence of the Bill.

I thank the Chairperson and members of the Environment Committee for their frank and open views, which have helped to determine the provisions of the Bill. I also extend my thanks to the Members who participated in the debate at Consideration Stage. Officials in the Department have worked closely with district councils and other local government interests to ensure that best value is implemented in a structured way. I endorse that approach and agree entirely with my predecessor, Sam Foster, that such a partnership arrangement should continue in the months ahead.

Finally, there is still much work for local government officials to do in respect of best value developments. Reviews of best value are presently under way in England and Wales. The outcome of those reviews, and the progress on best value legislation in Scotland, may help to inform the process of developing best value and guiding local government in Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Local Government (Best Value) Bill (NIA Bill 19/00) do now pass.

12.00 pm

BUDGET BILL

Final Stage

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Final Stage of the Budget Bill (NIA Bill 2/01) do now pass. — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren).*]

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

ASSEMBLY: COMMITTEE OF THE CENTRE

Resolved:

That Mr Barry McElduff replace Ms Michelle Gildernew as a member of the Committee of the Centre. — [*Mr C Murphy.*]

Mr Speaker: Mr Morrow's Colleagues have advised me that he has unfortunately been unable to get to the House this morning. Therefore the next motion must fall. I have no doubt that the matter will be brought back at a later stage.

REVIEW OF THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the findings contained in the First Report of the Committee on Procedures: 'Review of the Legislative Process in the Northern Ireland Assembly' (Report 01/01R) and endorses the recommendations contained therein.

A Cheann Comhairle, as Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures I am pleased to bring the report to the Assembly's attention. This is the first report by the Committee on Procedures, and it details the Committee's findings of its inquiry into the progression of legislation, which is a fundamental function of the Assembly. I shall begin by explaining briefly why the Committee decided to undertake the inquiry, and then look at how it was conducted. I will then outline some of the key findings and recommendations.

The impetus for the review was provided by the Committee's concern that the initial procedures for the progression of legislation were not as effective as they should be. For example, Standing Orders provided only for a single amendment stage. That is considerably less than the procedures in other legislatures. The Committee decided in October 2000, therefore, to initiate a review of the procedures.

The Committee began its review by seeking evidence from a wide range of organisations and individuals. On behalf of the Committee, I extend our gratitude to those organisations and individuals who took the time to respond in detail to our request. I also thank the Assembly's legal adviser, the examiner of statutory rules and the Assembly research services for their assistance to the Committee in its deliberations. The research service provided an excellent paper, which highlighted practices in several other places. Although one has to be careful in drawing comparisons, particularly considering our unique political system, the research was extremely useful in helping the Committee get a feel for what could be introduced here.

The Committee built on that knowledge by visiting the Scottish Parliament and the Dáil. The Committee also took the innovative step of establishing a subcommittee to undertake the evidence sessions of the inquiry and to prepare a draft report for the full Committee's consideration.

I will now outline some of the key recommendations contained in the report. Before doing so it will be useful to inform Members of some of the main findings of our research, as they underpin our recommendations. My Colleagues on the Committee will address some of the other recommendations. I wish to point out that all the parties represented on the Committee agreed the recommendations in the report.

Members should note that we are in our infancy as a legislature as regards the progression of legislation, in comparison to the Oireachtas or Westminster. From devolution until the end of the 2001 session, 21 Bills progressed through the Assembly. Of those 21 Bills, 17 went through Committee Stage. What is more striking, however, is that eight of the 17 were considered by the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

This means that the majority of Committees have had limited experience of taking the Committee Stages of Bills, and a couple have yet to take one. The upshot is that Statutory Committees, in their submissions to this review, were limited in what they saw as the need for improvement.

However, the need to lengthen the Committee Stage from its present 30-calendar-day limit was common to all submissions. The Committee found that, to the end of the 2001 session, the average length of Committee Stages was nine weeks, which is substantially more than 30 days.

Another key finding of our research was that the pre-legislative consultation between Departments and Committees was not as thorough as it should have been. The Committee found that, on almost half the Bills that went through Committee Stage, there was no pre-legislative consultation, although this may be explained by the fact that a number of Bills were introduced in the immediate aftermath of devolution.

There is evidence that in most instances the level of pre-legislative scrutiny with Committees is improving. However, it is still disappointing to note that at the end of the last session no Department had submitted a draft Bill for Committee consideration as part of its pre-legislative consultation. This point about pre-legislative scrutiny is important, and I will come back to it later. It is at the core of our recommendations.

Another key finding of the Committee was in relation to human rights and legislation. The Committee found that, to the end of the last session, the Assembly had not considered it necessary to establish an Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements as provided for in Standing Order 33, nor had it found it necessary to formally refer a Bill to the Human Rights Commission.

I have outlined some of the key findings, and now I would like to turn to the recommendations. The first, and perhaps the most far-reaching, of the Committee's recommendations pertains to pre-legislative consultation. The need for pre-legislative scrutiny is emphasised in the other legislatures that we examined and in the guidance for progressing legislation issued to Departments by the Executive.

One of the key recommendations in a recent memorandum from the Modernisation Committee at

Westminster was that Ministers should make greater use of draft Bills as part of their pre-legislative consultation. Our recommendation concurs fully with that. However, rather than incorporating it into Standing Orders at this stage, and in order to give the Executive time to introduce it, the Committee advises that the recommendation be incorporated into the protocol on information and evidence which is to be agreed between the Executive and the Assembly.

The Committee recommends that this practice be reviewed after 12 months. If it has not been implemented to a satisfactory level, the Committee will look at it again with a view to making it a requirement under Standing Orders. I cannot overemphasise the importance of this recommendation, because it underpins the rest of the Committee's report.

The Committee is firmly of the view that if Ministers and Committees thrash out their concerns on proposed legislation before it enters the Assembly, this is likely to lead to quicker and less contentious passage through the Assembly. While the Committee acknowledges that for a variety of reasons this will not be applicable to all types of legislation — for example, Budget Bills — it should apply to the majority of proposed legislation.

Another important recommendation centres on the minimum time between each stage of the legislative process. Currently that period is five working days. However, immediately after devolution it was seven working days; it was only later reduced to five. In its submission to the review, the Executive recommended that this should be further reduced to four working days. Their argument was that it would allow Stages of a Bill to be considered in consecutive weeks. Under current sitting arrangements, if a Consideration Stage is held on a Tuesday, then the Further Consideration Stage cannot be held until the following Monday week, which is some eight working days later. The Executive contended that this unduly delays the process.

As part of its consideration of the proposal the Committee looked at the practice in other legislatures, particularly in Scotland, where there is usually a minimum of two weeks between the Stages of a Bill. The Committee also noted that if the period between Stages were reduced, less time would be available for Members or Committees to table amendments to a Bill. The Committee believes that this is an important consideration, particularly where the Bill is complex or contentious. The Committee acknowledges that as the legislative programme increases, we may have to revisit this issue with a view to increasing the number of days, perhaps reverting to the original seven days.

However, the Committee agreed that the time period between the Second Stage and Committee Stage could be removed. At present, when a Bill passes its Second Stage it is referred to a Committee to report on it. The

Committee cannot consider the Bill until five days have elapsed, yet the 30-day period within which a Committee has to report starts the day after the Second Stage is completed.

Therefore Committees have to report within 25 days. Several Committees highlighted this difficulty in their submissions and recommended that the time period be removed. The Committee on Procedures shares this view and recommends that the five-day rule be removed from Standing Orders.

It is not surprising that Committees think that the 30-day period does not allow sufficient time for adequate scrutiny of legislation. The Committee on Procedures found that the average length of the Committee Stage was nine weeks — more than twice the length of time provided for in Standing Orders. Several recommendations were made to the Committee as regards how long Committee Stage should be: some want 90 days; others want 60. The Committee again looked at practice elsewhere and noticed that time limits were generally not set for the Committee Stage of a Bill in other legislatures. The Committee found it telling that when visiting the Dáil to view the Committee Stage of a Bill there, it had been under consideration for nearly a year.

We examined what Assembly Committees were doing at Committee stage, and why that work was taking longer than the 30-day period set out in Standing Orders. The Committee noted that other time restrictions considerably shortened the period. One of these, which I have already referred to, is the five-day period between Second Stage and Committee Stage, which reduces the overall period to 25 days. Printing a report can take more than a week. The net result is a Committee period lasting about 20 days. Faced with this reality, Committees automatically feel that they need an extension of the Committee Stage. Under the arrangements for tabling motions, a request for extension has to be tabled at an early stage in the period.

Having considered the administrative arrangements alongside the views expressed in the Committees' submissions, the Committee on Procedures agreed that the length of the Committee Stage must be changed. An important consideration when determining how long the Committee Stage should be was our view that the submission of a draft Bill as part of the legislative consultation should become the norm. If that were to happen, less time would be required at Committee Stage. The Committee felt that 30 working days would be more appropriate. In effect this would give Committees six weeks to consider a Bill. When this period is set alongside the existing administrative arrangements for calculating the 30-day period, this is a more realistic timescale.

The Committee considered whether Committees should be given the power to amend a Bill. As Members know, Committees cannot amend a Bill during Committee

Stage. Committees are required to report on the Bill to the Assembly. If it so wishes, a Committee can table amendments at Consideration Stage. Again, drawing from the work of other legislatures, we noted that their Committees had the power to amend Bills during Committee Stage. The legislature would then have an opportunity to consider the amended Bill at what they called "Report Stage."

The Committee on Procedures asked representatives from OFMDFM for their views on the matter. Although they advised us that the Executive had not taken a view, they thought that Committees could not legally be given power to amend a Bill. This view contrasted with advice from the Assembly legal adviser, who suggested they could. The Committee requested legal opinion from OFMDFM, but it has yet to respond.

During its discussions the Committee recognised some of the historical reasons why Committees should not be given such a power. Most notable was the concern that a Committee could amend a Bill at Committee Stage in a way which might not reflect the wishes of the Assembly, and might be difficult to undo at Consideration Stage. However, the Committee on Procedures considered it strange that Committees could initiate legislation, yet could not amend it.

There was some support from members of the Committee on Procedures who recommended that such powers be given to Statutory Committees and the Committee of the Centre. However, the overriding factor was the view of the Statutory Committees themselves: there is no demand from them to be given such authority. Given my earlier comments about the relative inexperience of Committees in this area of work, perhaps this is not surprising.

Another factor that explains why the Committee on Procedures is not recommending such a change is the recognition that any such change would have massive procedural implications, particularly for the role of the Minister at Committee Stage. It would also have knock-on effects on the purpose of Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage. Therefore the Committee recognised that before it could recommend changes to Standing Orders it would have to undertake detailed consultation with the Executive and Committees. This is an important issue and one that will come to the fore again as Committees get more experience in the legislative process.

There has been some debate about accelerated passage in the House. The current procedure that allows Bills to progress through the Assembly in 10 days is normally used for Budget Bills, and Standing Orders refer specifically to this.

12.15 pm

At present, the requirement for accelerated passage is the leave of the House. The Executive recommended

that the use of accelerated passage should be reduced. In its consideration of the matter the Committee reviewed the existing provisions of Standing Order 40, which require a Minister to explain to the House the reason for a delay and the action he or she has taken to avoid having to use accelerated passage in future. The infrequent use of the procedure convinced the Committee that it was unlikely that the accelerated passage provision would be further misused. The Committee considered that the requirement for leave was unnecessarily high when set against other major decisions of the Assembly, which have a lower threshold. Therefore the Committee recommends that the requirement be reduced from leave of the House to cross-community support.

I will now move to the Committee's consideration of the human rights aspects of the legislative process. The Human Rights Commission gave a detailed submission to the Committee and made some proposals for changes to Standing Orders. The main thrust of the Human Rights Commission's submission was that the current legislative procedures in the Assembly are not sufficiently robust with regard to human rights scrutiny. The commission recommended that a new committee on human rights and equality be established to examine and report on all human rights and equality issues coming within the competence of the Assembly. That would include compatibility with relevant human rights standards. It was proposed that the committee should replace the current Ad Hoc Special Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements and that one of its key functions should be the scrutiny of all Bills before they proceed to Royal Assent to ensure that they comply with human rights and equality standards.

In its consideration of this, the Procedures Committee took evidence from Prof Stephen Livingstone, head of the School of Law at Queen's University, and Brice Dickson of the Human Rights Commission. The Committee also received advice from the Assembly's legal adviser.

In its analysis, the Committee broke down the key recommendations of the commission. It decided that a new committee on human rights, with a broad mandate to investigate human rights issues, would not come within the remit of an inquiry on the legislative process, so the Committee focused its consideration on a proposal for a new committee which, in simple terms, would clear all legislation before it proceeded to Royal Assent. On that, the Committee examined the existing procedures to identify the checks carried out for human rights scrutiny and was encouraged by the level of such scrutiny on proposed legislation. That information is given on page 16 of the report. We noted that at each stage of the legislative process there are checks and balances to ensure that legislation complies with human rights standard. It was clear that the Human Rights Commission was not aware of how far these checks go.

We also considered the Committees' current scrutiny role of proposed legislation. As Members will appreciate, Committees play an extremely important part in the Assembly's commitment to human rights proofing of draft legislation. That can happen at any stage of the process, but particularly at both the pre-legislative stage and at Committee Stage where questions can be raised with the Minister about the human rights implications of a Bill. Indeed, on a number of occasions, Committees have asked the Human Rights Commission to give evidence during a Committee Stage on the human rights implications of a Bill. That led the Procedures Committee to conclude that the commission had, in some way, underemphasised the important role that Committees have played in the process. The Committee also agreed that, in fulfilling the role set out in the Good Friday Agreement for scrutinising legislation, it was important that Committees should continue to consider all implications of a Bill, including their impact on human rights. The Procedures Committee was concerned that if this responsibility were passed to one Committee alone, human rights could become marginalized. It is not easy to pick out a provision of a Bill and ask that it be considered in isolation. The overall content of the Bill has to be taken into account, so there is a concern about referring a whole Bill to a human rights committee for scrutiny. In addition, with reference to the Committee's first recommendation about pre-legislative scrutiny, it would be impractical at that stage to refer matters to a new human rights committee.

It is for these reasons that the Committee does not agree with the Human Rights Commission's proposal for a separate human rights committee to consider all legislation, and a human rights committee with a general remit for inquiry is an issue for further debate in the Assembly.

I will turn now to look at the Further Consideration Stage. At present, Further Consideration Stage is a re-run of Consideration Stage. In their submission, the Executive suggested that this was unnecessary and that the plenary Assembly should not be asked to vote again on an issue that had been voted through, perhaps the previous week. While the Committee considered it important that Members should have a second opportunity to amend a Bill, it agreed that there would be benefit in refining.

The Committee agreed with the Executive that the Assembly should not be asked to vote again on clauses or schedules that have already been voted to stand part of a Bill. The Committee recommends that Standing Orders be changed to amend the Further Consideration Stage so that debate and vote at that stage would be limited only to any amendments tabled. The Assembly would not be asked to vote that clauses or schedules stand part of the Bill.

I remind Members of what I said at the start of this debate. The Assembly is in its infancy as regards

progressing legislation. Therefore its procedures should be subject to continuous review. Many issues will require further consideration in the future — for example, Committees amending Bills. There are other issues, which we have not touched upon yet, such as Private Member's Bills, Committee Bills and Private Bills. As yet we have no experience to judge the efficiency of our procedures on those issues. However, I assure the Assembly that we will examine them.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Cobain): I congratulate the Committee on Procedures for examining this highly complex issue. It is right that our procedures should be subject to regular review. We are learning all the time, and we need to be able to make adjustments to the way in which we do business. The review undertaken by the Committee on Procedures is particularly important to the Social Development Committee.

The main issues considered by the Committee on Procedures, listed in paragraph 2.2.1 on page 5 of the report, go to the heart of the way in which legislation is handled in the House, and they should be of interest to everyone.

I am confident that members of the Social Development Committee will welcome recommendation 4.7 of the report, which states that

“as part of the pre-introductory consultation on proposed legislation, Ministers should submit a draft of the Bill for Committee consideration”.

That recommendation speaks for itself. Statutory Committees have scrutiny, policy development and consultation roles, and they undertake the Committee Stage of relevant primary legislation. It is therefore entirely sensible that they should be involved with legislative proposals as early as possible.

I am even more confident that the Social Development Committee will welcome the recommendations in paragraph 2.5.3, which calls for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to present to the Committee on Procedures

“a new procedure for the progression of parity legislation”.

That issue exercises the Social Development Committee greatly in respect of both primary and subordinate legislation.

The Social Development Committee has been faced with two recent examples of so-called parity legislation, which have been handled in completely different ways. First, the House was told that the Social Security Fraud Bill was parity legislation, and it accepted that statement. It did so, because, although social security is a devolved matter, it is important to maintain parity with the rest of Great Britain. Therefore a Social Security Fraud Bill which mirrored the GB provisions was brought before the House.

The Bill was denied accelerated passage and, as a result, was subject to scrutiny at the Committee Stage. We were told of the desperate financial implications of going our own way on social security matters. We were warned that we would have to find moneys from the Northern Ireland block grant, and that we would have to set up a separate, expensive, local social security computer system. Those warnings were used as justification for maintaining the parity principle. Some people described it as

“what is good for the people of Birmingham, is good for the people of Belfast. What is good for the people of Liverpool is good for the people of Londonderry.”

Have we ever been given a definition of parity? Neither the Social Development Committee nor I believe that we have. I submit that the Committee and the House need a clear definition of parity.

The second example relates to the programme of welfare reform which is being pursued by the Government in Westminster. Last year they published proposals for a Tax Credit Bill. We were told that the reforms applied across the United Kingdom. We were told that it was a matter of parity.

However, because taxation is not a devolved matter, the provisions that relate to Northern Ireland were contained in a Westminster Bill. They were not subject to scrutiny by the Assembly.

Other issues must be resolved. The Minister for Social Development recently told the Committee that he intends to bring a housing support Bill to the Assembly soon. The Bill has its origins in legislative reform generated at Westminster. Is it parity legislation? The Committee has also become aware of two other pieces of primary legislation to deal with social security and state pensions, which presumably come under welfare reform. Are they parity Bills? What are the chances that the case will be made for accelerated passage for those Bills, despite the Assembly being told that accelerated passage should be used only in exceptional circumstances? Is it right that Standing Order 40 provides the opportunity for accelerated passage?

I do not share the confidence of the Committee on Procedures that, if the requirement of unanimity is reduced to cross-community support, the procedures will not be abused. There will be circumstances in which someone may seek to abuse that facility, while arguing forcibly that that is not the case. Perhaps parity will be central to that argument.

Accelerated passage and the welfare reform Bills might be the best way to proceed. The Assembly has little choice but to accept the arguments for a single system. That may be because of the threat that exists to the Northern Ireland block grant; because of the cost of introducing a separate computer system; or

because people in Belfast should be treated the same as people in Birmingham.

When those arguments are considered, they eventually come full circle and return to the vexed question of the effect that it may have on the block grant. The outcome may prove to be a combination of all three scenarios. A paper on parity would be welcome — especially were it to offer a full and clear definition of parity. Proposals on how to deal differently with parity legislation would also be welcome, especially if the Committee on Procedures examined it carefully in order to ensure protection of the rights and responsibilities of the House, and that the House and its Committees do the job that they are required to do under the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

If the Assembly is sincere about its responsibilities to the electorate, that issue must be sorted out once and for all. However, it must be done carefully. I contend that where it is clear that Northern Ireland will be legislated for by Westminster, especially in situations in which powers have been devolved, there is a case for procedure to be put in place. That procedure should enable the relevant Secretary of State to consult formally with the Statutory Committees at an appropriate time. Moreover, the procedure should ensure that the Assembly's input is acknowledged and valued.

I welcome the acknowledgement that Committee Stage invariably takes longer than is currently provided for in Standing Orders. In my usual spirit of helpfulness, I wonder if the Committee might consider an alternative amendment to Standing Orders, which would provide for the length of Committee Stage to be determined by the House when a Bill is first introduced. I should have thought that, given the pre-introductory consultation stage envisaged and proposed by the Committee on Procedures, and knowing the size and potential for controversy of any Bill, it would be possible for the Committee to indicate, perhaps at First Stage, how long might be needed to conclude Committee Stage. That might help the Assembly's business planning.

Mr Speaker: There are only a few Members left to speak, most of whom are members of the Business Committee. I propose that, rather than suspend now and resume the debate later, we complete the debate and, by leave of the House, suspend until after lunch.

12.30 pm

Mr A Maginness: I found Mr Cobain's contribution interesting. The question of the definition of parity legislation must be looked at in more depth. It is something that the Committee on Procedures should consider further.

I thank Mr Conor Murphy for his chairmanship in relation to the report and for steering the Committee

through difficult areas. I also thank the Committee Clerk and the other staff who assisted with the report.

I support the motion. This investigation of the legislative procedure has been a learning process for all the Committee members. As the Chairperson said, we are in our infancy as regards progressing legislation. As the legislative programme increases, there will undoubtedly be further procedural quirks or problems that will need to be fully addressed.

The report highlights — and this should be recognised — the fact that legislation is progressed relatively quickly and efficiently through the Assembly. It also demonstrates that the institutions that emerged from the Good Friday Agreement work, and that Committees do an effective job in scrutinising draft legislation.

I will concentrate my remarks on the Committees. It is important that Members' attention be drawn to Committees and their roles. Current Standing Orders do not permit Committees to amend Bills. I am puzzled as to why that is so. Like many other Members, I suspect that when the Act was drafted there were some, perhaps understandable, fears about how Committees might behave — or even misbehave. Indeed, there may have been some concern as to whether they would actually work at all.

There may also have been a fear that, if Committees were given the authority to amend Bills at Committee Stage, Bills would be amended beyond recognition and, effectively, shredded. The recent argument over the Local Government (Best Value) Bill puts that fear to bed. That Bill is an example of how a Committee can use its influence to radically alter a Bill without actually having the power to amend it.

As the Chairperson of a Statutory Committee, I am particularly interested in that issue. On the Committee's visits to the Oireachtas and the Scottish Parliament, I was extremely impressed by the scrutiny role that Committees play in those legislatures, especially the way in which Committees are able to go through a Bill line by line with the Minister and seek his explanation for any provisions that they wish to query.

As such meetings are in public session and are recorded, it is possible for the public, and indeed other Members, to see the Minister's intention behind any particular provision of a Bill. It could be compared with the practice of using probing amendments, which are designed to get the Minister's explanation of a particular clause on public record without really intending to amend the clause. This Assembly might benefit from the use of probing amendments.

Having observed the practice in other places, the Committee and I gave much thought to giving Assembly Committees the authority to amend Bills. I can see no substantive reason why Committees should not be

given that authority. I find it strange that the Committee for Regional Development, of which I am Chairperson, can, at least in theory, bring forward its own legislation, yet it cannot amend legislation.

However, I accept that any such change would require more in-depth consultation, particularly with the Executive, because a change at Committee Stage would have implications for the role of the Minister.

Equally, further consultation with each Committee would be necessary. As the Chairperson may have mentioned, the Committees have made no substantive demand for that. That will change, perhaps not during this Assembly mandate, but probably in the next, when I hope that we will all be present — *[Interruption]*.

I note that everyone endorses that hope. In time, Committees will exercise fully the responsibility and authority that was given to them by the Good Friday Agreement.

In conclusion, the importance of the review should not be underestimated. It has shown that as a legislature we are fulfilling people's expectations and hopes by legislating to the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland.

Mr Morrow: I apologise for not having been present to move a motion in my name, due to circumstances far beyond my control.

The report details a thorough review of the current procedures for progressing legislation through the Assembly. The Committee discussed at length the key issue of parity legislation. As a former Minister, I know only too well the need to introduce legislation quickly. That applies to social security legislation, as the unique position of social security, child support and pensions is specifically recognised in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Section 87 of the Act recognises the long-standing principle of parity between Great Britain and Northern Ireland in social security. Although social security is still a devolved matter, it has already been agreed with the Secretary of State responsible for social security that there will be a single system for social security, child support and pensions.

Although I acknowledge that parity is necessary and that the speedy introduction of such legislation is important, I am mindful of the relevant Committee's important statutory obligation to scrutinise legislation. A balance must be reached, but we are not at the stage of recommending a method of achieving that. That is unfortunate, because the matter should be addressed sooner rather than later. It is a complex issue, which is not as straightforward as sometimes it seems. For example, there are differences of opinion on the exact meaning of "parity". Its meaning is clear to me, but I cannot speak for everyone in the House.

Parity covers the content of the legislation as well as the timing of its implementation, and we must ensure

that the people of Northern Ireland do not lose out. That is a real danger, particularly when we deal with social security legislation, and, as Minister for Social Development, I made that point when I sought accelerated passage for the Social Security Fraud Bill in 2001.

I recognise that there must be further work and consultation on the issue, and I am pleased to note that OFMDFM will present draft procedures to the Committee on Procedures.

I urge that that be done sooner rather than later, so that the draft procedures are not lost in the ether of OFMDFM.

Mr B Hutchinson: I congratulate the Committee on Procedures on the substantial amount of work that it did when considering the issue. All the answers have not been provided, but a start has been made that will focus people's minds. The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development addressed most of the issues that I intended to address, and I support his remarks.

Several points reinforce his comments. Problems exist with parity and accelerated passage. The situation is different in the Scottish Parliament. People claim that that is because Scotland has a Parliament, while Northern Ireland has an Assembly. However, if Westminster legislation is to be introduced in Scotland, the Scottish Parliament is informed in advance. Members of the Scottish Parliament have the opportunity to consider the legislation ahead of time — we do not have that opportunity. We are told that, because of parity, we cannot consider legislation until Westminster has agreed it.

I agree with most of what Mr Morrow said, except for his comments on balance. We must make decisions. If the balance problem concerns content or timing, we must decide whether we accept parity and allow legislation to have accelerated passage, or whether we believe that we should have an input earlier in the formulation of legislation rather than at its introduction. The argument is not whether people in Liverpool and Londonderry should get the same money. The argument is about content, and what it could mean for people's human rights.

The best system for us would be for the Assembly to consider the legislation at the beginning of the drafting process. If we decide that Westminster should introduce legislation for the entire United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, we should allow the Committee for Social Development to bring other Bills before the House to be scrutinised. Social security legislation is important, but members of the Committee for Social Development are frustrated because they have little say in its creation. They cannot scrutinise it — it is presented to them as a *fait accompli*. That must change or else we must concede that, as we accept parity, we

accept that Westminster will not introduce legislation here that contains inequalities.

I accept what Conor Murphy said about the amount of legislation that is introduced. However, we should exercise caution when saying that the Assembly's infancy is the reason for the paralysis. We must examine the paralysis that exists in introducing legislation and find a cure for it. We should not make excuses about the Assembly being in its infancy. We must consider how best to introduce, scrutinise and implement legislation so that the people benefit from it.

Mr McClarty: I support the motion and endorse the report. The report marks the end of an extensive review of the procedures that we use to progress legislation in the Assembly. As we enter the final year of the current Assembly mandate, it is only right that we evaluate how efficient our procedures are for progressing the basic function of the Assembly, which is to legislate.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures highlighted several important recommendations in the report, and I support that. One of the report's most practical recommendations relates to the Further Consideration Stage of a Bill. The Committee on Procedures introduced that stage in July 2000 in response to concern that was expressed — which the Committee shared — that the Assembly should be given a second opportunity to amend a Bill.

Prior to that, there was only one opportunity — at Consideration Stage — to amend legislation. When the Further Consideration Stage was introduced, it was recognised that an evaluation of its effectiveness would be required at a later date. This was primarily because it was agreed, with good reason, that Further Consideration Stage should be a rerun of Consideration Stage. Again, that was introduced when this legislature had considered only a few Bills.

12.45 pm

It must be acknowledged that Further Consideration Stage has not caused any procedural problems to date. However, the Committee concluded that it could foresee a scenario where, in an extreme case, a clause or schedule of a Bill could be voted in at Consideration Stage and voted down at Further Consideration Stage. The net result of that would be, at best, bad legislation, and, at worst, defective legislation. The Committee agreed that the loophole must be closed.

To address the situation, the Committee recommends that Further Consideration Stage should apply only to those clauses or schedules that are subject to amendment, and that only amendments should be voted on. That clause or schedule should not be voted on again, because it has already been voted to stand part of the

Bill. This is consistent with the practice in the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament.

Although the Committee focused most of its attention on the procedures relating to primary legislation, it made a couple of recommendations on subordinate legislation. The main recommendation addresses what the Committee considered to be a gap in Standing Orders, and concerns the Assembly's ability to scrutinise all subordinate legislation, which is the practice in the Scottish Parliament and Westminster. Under existing Standing Orders, some pieces of subordinate legislation are not subject to Assembly scrutiny, despite the fact that they have considerable powers. For example, the Examiner of Statutory Rules' recent report highlighted the way in which some subordinate legislation that is not subject to Assembly scrutiny has the power to modify primary legislation. I am sure that Members agree that we should not continue to allow that scenario to exist.

In its consideration of the matter, the Committee agreed that the Assembly should have the power to scrutinise all legislation. It is important, as a legislature, that we have procedures in place that allow the closest possible examination of subordinate legislation.

I endorse the report and commend it to the Assembly.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Members for their contributions. I am pleased that they agree that the Committee's review of the legislative process was worthwhile. It was certainly timely because many of the frustrations with, and anomalies in, the system have been highlighted. We have dealt with some of those, and we will have to set our minds to dealing with others.

Members made it clear that some of the issues that were raised in the report will be revisited in the near future. The issue of parity legislation, which was highlighted by Fred Cobain, Maurice Morrow and Billy Hutchinson, is recognised by the Committee as being a complex issue. The Committee accepts that the matter will need to be examined in greater detail in the next few months. There is a divergence of opinion on the issue, and it will not be easy to reach agreement, but we must set our minds to it.

Fred Cobain made several points about parity legislation, the first of which concerned the definition of "parity". That is useful, but I am not sure whether it is the responsibility of the Committee on Procedures or the Committee for Social Development to pursue that. He also proposed a formal mechanism for the scrutiny of Bills that are passed in Westminster. I am sure that the Committee Clerks have noted those points, and we must check which Committee is responsible; it may be the Committee on Procedures. However, if those Bills would normally fall to the Social Development

Committee, it may be a matter for it to pursue. The proposal for such a mechanism would find widespread sympathy here.

I echo Maurice Morrow's call for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to bring forward proposals to deal with parity legislation sooner rather than later — that is important.

Fred Cobain mentioned the abuse of the accelerated passage procedure. Parity legislation is important for the people that we represent, but there are even bigger decisions that do not require such a high threshold as obtaining the leave of the House, and, therefore, the Committee proposes to lower the threshold so that all that is required is cross-community support. Of course, that system can be abused, but so can any voting procedure. We propose that one Member's objection to a Bill should no longer be sufficient to stop that Bill from gaining accelerated passage — in order for it to be blocked, there must be some substantial disagreement.

All procedures and Standing Orders are continuously reviewed; we regularly get suggestions from Committees, Members, the Executive and the Speaker as to changes that they feel are necessary, and we revise them on that basis.

Fred Cobain suggested the idea of an alternative amendment to allow the House to decide the length of the Committee Stage, Bill by Bill, depending on how complex the Bill is considered to be. Although we have not heard that suggestion before, we received a variety of opinions on how long the Committee Stage should be. We have changed the length from 30 calendar days to 30 working days — in effect, six weeks.

The Committee that has dealt with the most legislation is the Committee for Finance and Personnel. Some Committees have never dealt with the Committee Stage of a Bill, and we will happily revisit the matter if this proves not to work properly. If Members find that there is a case for deciding on the length of the Committee Stage of each Bill as it proceeds through the House, we will re-examine the matter. One of the most important points in our report is the need for proper pre-legislative scrutiny — an idea that Mr Cobain supported. The introduction of draft Bills to Committees would considerably reduce the length of time needed at Committee Stage.

Alban Maginness spoke about our consideration of the suggestion that all Committees should be given the authority to amend Bills. Although he, and others, have supported that suggestion, the fact that no Committee has asked for that facility to be granted to it was a key factor in our decision not to introduce that suggestion at this stage. However, as with all the other proposals, we are willing to revisit it should a case be made, and I am sure that that will happen as Committees gain more expertise in dealing with Bills.

Billy Hutchinson mentioned the paralysis in legislation coming forward from OFMDFM. The Committee's report does not attempt to provide any rationale or excuse for that. Many people share Mr Hutchinson's frustration. Our report examines the legislative process with a view to making it more efficient, although not necessarily with a view to speeding it up. The report deals with the period between the introduction of a Bill and its Final Stage. The delay in introducing Bills for a First Stage is outside the remit of this report, but it is an issue that many Members have raised and will continue to raise until those delays are dealt with effectively.

David McClarty mentioned Further Consideration Stage and subordinate legislation. A recurring theme throughout the inquiry was that the Executive wanted the process of legislation speeded up and the Members wanted it slowed down — although it may not have been expressed as bluntly as that. We did not try to strike a balance because that is not our job. Our job is to represent what we believe are Members' interests and those of the House as a whole, and that means providing proper scrutiny. At times, we heard contrary views from the Executive and the Committees in general. The proposals make for more effective scrutiny of legislation, which is our role here. Their purpose is not simply to facilitate the rushing through of legislation; it is also to facilitate more effective scrutiny on behalf of the electorate.

As I said at the start of the debate, the procedures for the progression of legislation need to be kept under continuous review. As Committees gain more experience in the scrutiny of legislation, they will be better informed to identify necessary improvements to procedures. The Committee on Procedures firmly believes that the recommendations identified in its report will improve the efficiency with which we progress legislation in the Assembly. However, the cornerstone to any improvements will be more detailed and meaningful pre-legislative consultation. I ask the Executive to take on board that point and to do their utmost to ensure that Committees are consulted at an early stage about proposed legislation. Where possible, a draft of the Bill should be submitted to the Committee for scrutiny.

I conclude by endorsing the report to the Assembly and, once again, by thanking all who took time to participate in the debate. I also want to place on record, as Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures, Committee members' appreciation for the Clerk and staff of the Committee, and all who assisted in the production of the report.

Mr Speaker: Before putting the question, I remind the House, for the sake of clarity, that the passage of this report, insofar as it calls for changes in Standing Orders, will not implement changes in Standing Orders. They will have to be implemented at a subsequent

stage and, of course, voted through on a cross-community basis.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the findings contained in the First Report of the Committee on Procedures: 'Review of the Legislative Process in the Northern Ireland Assembly' (Report 01/01R) and endorses the recommendations contained therein.

The sitting was suspended at 12.57 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClelland] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

CAPITAL SPENDING IN EDUCATION

Mr Kennedy: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the backlog of capital works required for school buildings across all geographic areas and all sectors of education in Northern Ireland. The Assembly asks the Minister of Education to take note of the underinvestment in the controlled sector and the pattern of capital spending announcements in recent years when deciding upon the allocation of money for school building in March 2002.

Is there any indication as to whether the Minister of Education intends to be present for the debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have not been informed by the Minister as to whether he will be in attendance.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek clarification on the objective criteria deployed to select amendments. For the second year running in this type of debate, an amendment offered by my party has been disregarded, even though it is fairly close in substance and form to the original motion. I have to wonder whether this is political correctness. We are very concerned about the sidelining of our amendment. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I shall make two remarks. First, the Member has been in the Assembly long enough to know that he need not be informed of the reason why the Speaker selected, or did not select, an amendment. Secondly, I strongly advise the Member against any inference that the Speaker's Office might be in any way politically motivated. I cannot emphasise that strongly enough.

Mr Kennedy: I speak as a private Member and not in my role as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education. I am concerned at the absence of the Minister of Education, and I wait with interest to see whether he attends this important and very timely debate.

The motion seeks to draw the Assembly's attention to the unacceptable condition of schools in every sector of our education system. Although I accept that school capital projects have been underfunded for many years — even from before the Assembly was created — I must highlight the current Minister's poor record in addressing that problem.

It is not good enough for the Minister to hide behind the historic underfunding excuse, given his failure either to entice more money from the Executive or to produce proposals based on PFIs or public-private partnerships to meet the needs of our schools.

During my regular contact with school principals, boards of governors and educationists it has become clear that the condition of our schools has reached crisis point. Fresh, imaginative thinking must be employed to address the situation. Members will be aware — through constituency work and their service on school boards of governors — that the schools estate is in a very sorry state, with crumbling buildings and many out-of-date and unacceptable mobile classrooms. We expect pupils to excel in those circumstances and for teachers and staff to withstand those conditions. Meanwhile, the Minister and his Department seem powerless to address those problems. The motion is a cry for help to the Assembly to do something about the situation rather than to wring our hands and blame the Tories.

The other main section of the motion highlights the very real concern over the confirmed pattern of under-funding that exists in the controlled sector, as well as the indisputable evidence that such discrimination exists and is apparently actively pursued by the Minister, presumably to pursue his party's narrow political ends.

Undoubtedly the Minister will attempt to excuse his actions and previous announcements by quoting statistics that effectively seek to gloss over the true situation and to ignore reality. I am especially concerned at the treatment meted out by the Minister to post-primary schools — secondary and grammar — in the controlled sector over recent years. The truth does not lie in the statistics produced by the Minister and his officials, which at first seem fair and equitable. It is only when one digs deeply into the ministerial announcements and press releases that one begins to unearth the truth of the matter.

For example, last year no school in what might crudely be called the Protestant grammar sector received any funding allocation. Whether that was a result of the Minister's well-documented opposition to the grammar sector remains a matter for speculation; only the Minister can answer that. Whether it was the politics of envy being practised by an old-style socialist matters not: no allocation was made.

The other method that the Minister consistently used to cover his tracks when dealing with allegations of unfair treatment against the controlled sector was to pretend that schools such as special schools are really controlled schools, or that integrated schools fit into the controlled category. Again, such assertions are a blatant distortion of the facts. Most Members will accept that special schools cannot, and should not, be categorised or labelled as being either controlled or maintained, given that they serve the needs of the entire community in a non-sectarian fashion. They are entitled to a category of their own that will recognise their unique contribution to education in Northern Ireland.

Likewise, it is wrong that the integrated sector should be included in the controlled sector simply to

balance the ministerial books. I suspect that the advocates of integrated education — some of whom are prominent Members of the House — would be horrified to imagine that their schools were grouped within the controlled sector when the Minister was performing the sectarian headcount. It would be much more honest and honourable to recognise them in their own status.

The sad truth is that successive Ministers — not just the present incumbent — have used this rather novel system when crediting the controlled sector with allocations in capital building announcements. Tony Worthington did so, as did John McFall. Even poor old Michael Ancram fell into the trap. Undoubtedly predecessors such as Brian Mawhinney did so too. The Minister can put away his book of impressive statistics; they simply will not wash.

I wish to touch on two other matters. First, I want to highlight the ongoing lack of transparency in the system by which the Minister and his Department make allocations. Secondly, I wish to mention the role of the education and library boards in this process.

In spite of detailed discussions with departmental officials on the system used to determine the allocations made each year under category 3, it proved impossible for the Committee for Education to gain a clear understanding of how projects are chosen for inclusion. Although the members of the Committee for Education are an extremely determined bunch, we could not establish, try as we might, how the final allocations were made. Bagehot's famous phrase about the royal family and letting in light upon magic appears to be appropriate here. It is an unacceptable state of affairs that should, and must, be addressed by the Minister to the satisfaction, not only of the Education Committee, but of all Members.

My final concern surrounds the role played by the education and library boards in the system used by the Department to consider bids for the final allocation of capital building funds. The Education Committee found clear evidence that over the past couple of years, projects put forward as contenders by the boards were rejected by the Department because they were apparently incomplete. That is an unsatisfactory situation that the relevant boards must address and resolve without delay. Many schools in the controlled sector were oblivious to that situation, and it gave them a false expectation that could never be met.

In conclusion, if the Assembly is to help build a new Northern Ireland, that must be done purely on the basis of equity between all our people, and by clearly transparent policies, evident and practised throughout our system of government. If the current Minister of Education wishes to subscribe to those principles, he must stop taking decisions and making announcements that are clearly at odds with the notion of fairness and

equity so publicly enunciated by him. It is time for the Minister to go back to the drawing board, and that will be the test of his stewardship as Minister of Education. The question is, will he pass or will he fail? At the moment it is not looking good.

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move the following amendment: In line 3 delete all after “Northern Ireland”.

I am sure that all Members will join me in expressing concern at the backlog of capital school building works required across all geographical areas and the different sectors of education in Northern Ireland. If we could wave a wand and deal with all the schools on the planning list for capital development, it would take — at the very least — £500 million. As everybody knows, we cannot do that. Far too many schools will continue to be in a state of disrepair. Members know that poor accommodation and sub-standard school premises hinder the learning process of children caught up in such unfortunate circumstances.

I draw Members’ attention to the important word in the motion. The important word is “all”, as in “all geographical areas and all sectors of education”. The Assembly is committed to the principle of equality. Most important of all is the principle of equal treatment for our children. In deciding the allocation of funding — whenever that is done — the principle of equality has to be adhered to. Therefore allocation must be on the basis of need. That must be a guiding principle that underlies and underpins any allocations of funds, not just in March 2002 as the motion says, but every year. If we are to create a pluralist society that recognises and values diversity, we cannot see gain in one educational sector as a loss in any other.

2.15 pm

The second sentence of the motion implies, and the remarks of the mover of the motion confirm, that the concern is sectoral, as opposed to a concern for the needs of all children in all schools. We have heard examples used to suggest that there is a biased pattern of spending in the capital development programme. I have reservations about how Mr Kennedy makes the distinction between schools in the controlled sector and those outside it. I disagree with the way in which he has presented and interpreted that distinction.

I want to return to the principle of equality. As I said before, no school should be denied funding on the grounds that it belongs to a particular sector. Another important factor that greatly influences allocation, to which the mover referred, is whether a school that is on the planning list has those plans at a sufficiently advanced stage for approval to be given and funds to be allocated. Very often, as some Members will know, schools are not eligible for funding because their plans are not complete. That is one area that needs a great deal more attention. If we are to achieve equality of

treatment and direct resources to the most deserving and needy schools, more must be done to ensure that the schools with the worst conditions get the necessary help to have their plans ready in time for consideration. There have been examples over the years where expectations were built up that schools would get allocations, only to not receive them. That has been repeated year after year. We have to look seriously at that issue and assist schools so that they can get their plans ready and receive their allocations.

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I will not give way. Lack of preparedness of development plans in the past has meant that some schools in need have missed out. That has more to do with the failure to achieve funding rather than a suggestion of bias against any sector. There are ongoing concerns, and I want to refer briefly to those projects identified to go forward under public-private partnership (PPP). Projects for several schools were announced in last year’s round. It is regrettable that, since then, we have seen no sign of progress on that work. The rate of progress under PPP seems to be very slow — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is entitled to be heard.

Mr Gallagher: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. We are aware — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCartney — Order.

Mr Gallagher: While there is — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCartney, I will remind you about your attitude towards the Table for the last time this afternoon.

Mr Gallagher: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Since you did not warn me before, how can you warn me for the last time?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sit down, Mr McCartney, or I will have you named and taken from the Chamber.

Mr McCartney: No, you will not have me taken from the Chamber. You may have me named.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sit down, Mr Gallagher. I name you, Mr McCartney. Please leave.

The Member withdrew from the Chamber.

Mr Gallagher: The rate of progress under PPP is very slow. Schools are not seeing any progress, although they are aware that in the case of one school the figure that the Minister quoted for consultants’ fees was in excess of £620,000. The Assembly must receive definite information soon from the Minister and the Department about the start date for such schemes.

Accepting the substantive motion takes us into the realm of sectoral rivalry. Therefore I ask Members to support the amendment because it best serves and safeguards the interests of all our schools.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Members are aware, 90 minutes have been allocated for the debate. Therefore I must restrict each Member to five minutes.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I welcome the opportunity to speak, and I thank the Members who tabled the motion. They do a service to the community when they highlight blatant sectarianism in the allocation of finances. Schools across the Province are in an unacceptable condition, but the record in the state sector, under the stewardship of the Minister of Education, breaks all the bounds of any political agenda. No one can hide behind the argument of historic underfunding. It has been a reality in the maintained and controlled sectors. We know what it is to have crumbling school buildings and, therefore, we are asking for some fairness concerning the money that is available.

It is about time that we unearthed the truth. It is difficult to get answers from the Department of Education. I asked questions, but I was denied the answers because it would cost too much money to provide them. I tried another approach to obtain some of the figures. However, what I find in the written answers is far from the reality of the situation that I am trying to unearth.

Children's education is one of the most important aspects of modern day parenting. We have entered a period when learning will define our lives as never before. In the twentieth century, education was made a basic right for all, yet the high standard of education for all has conspicuously failed to be delivered.

The expenditure of funds in Mid Ulster, which is my constituency and the Minister's, highlights the inequality in the allocation of money. Members should come to the Magherafelt District Council area and see the situation for themselves. In recent years, several million pounds have been spent on the construction of St Mary's Grammar School on the Castledawson Road. That was necessary, and the money did need to be spent. All sectors of education have the right to spend money on their schools.

The next school that we come to is the controlled high school. It is a dilapidated building; the mobile classrooms and building itself are falling apart. Little money has been spent on it.

One hundred yards along the road is St Pius X High School. From 2001-03, a budget of £12 million will be spent on that building and its furnishings. I was not provided with that information in any of the answers that I requested. St Mary's Grammar School is at one end of the town and St Pius X High School is at the other — and approximately £20 million being spent on those two schools.

A dilapidated, deteriorating state school that everyone is entitled to attend is located between those schools. Protestant children are expected to continue their education in out-of-date laboratories and accommodation.

Maghera High School is deteriorating also; however, millions of pounds were spent on St Patrick's school recently. New maintained schools are planned for Cookstown and Donaghmore. What about the state-controlled schools that everyone is welcome to attend? The Minister should be ashamed, rather than running around with a brass neck — the allocation of funds is discriminatory and blatantly sectarian. That is unacceptable from the so-called Minister.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion that Sammy Wilson and Danny Kennedy tabled is seriously flawed. We should be able to reasonably expect more from the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education than for them to advocate a biased sectoral approach whereby money is diverted away from the needy and allocated on a sectarian basis instead.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: The Member will have a chance to reply later in the form of a winding-up speech. Initially, Sammy Wilson brought this hardy annual before the Assembly, and the Committee Chairperson has now joined the enterprise. The proposers are feigning and inventing a sense of discrimination against the controlled sector as a means of Minister-bashing and to extract more funds for one sector. Rather, provision should be judged on the basis of need.

It is worrying for other Committee members that Sammy Wilson should be joined by the Committee Chairperson, who seems to be constantly looking over the Deputy Chairperson's shoulder for fear that he will be outmanoeuvred by him. Sammy went it alone last year, but Danny is now acting as his sidekick on the matter. It damages the Committee's reputation and that of the office of Chairperson.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: No. I am glad that Mr Kennedy clearly stated that he did not speak on behalf of the Committee, although one might have thought that he did. I remind him that he does not speak on behalf of the Committee on the matter. I record my concern that an amendment that Mr McHugh and I tabled was overlooked, as was a similar amendment last year.

The Members who tabled the motion know better. However, they choose to ignore the evidence that the motion sectarianises the debate and is unhelpful and irresponsible, given the proposers' positions on the Committee. Our amendment, which stated that spending should be directed on the basis of educational need, focuses on the needs of all sectors, which are substantial.

Mr Gallagher stated that £500 million was needed to address those needs, and the backlog must be covered. However, there are insufficient resources to fund the number and cost of the projects that are required.

During the debate on the review of public administration, Dr Paisley referred colourfully to the proliferation of temporary classrooms as broken-down caravans defiling school yards. The Programme for Government comprises a target to reduce the number of temporary classrooms. Good luck to the Minister and to other Ministers in their prioritisation of that objective.

Major investment in all sectors is needed. Many classrooms are undersized and overcrowded, and there are structural deficiencies in the schools estate, health and safety risks, and an absence of dining halls and proper physical education facilities.

I am thankful that the new opportunities fund, through its physical education and sport programme, is addressing the deficiency in physical education.

2.30 pm

All children deserve to be taught in warm, safe, dry buildings. They need to be stimulated in an attractive, modern learning environment in which the delivery of the curriculum will not be inhibited or narrowed.

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: I have about 35 seconds left, and I choose not to give way.

The Members who tabled the motion know, or should know, that there are criteria. There is a methodology in place to determine which schools end up on the capital build programme. It is founded on the key element of educational need. However, there are none so deaf as those who will not hear.

I am opposed to a sectoral approach. If I were to go down that road I would be trumpeting the needs of the Irish-medium sector, but I accept that the situation will be judged on the basis of educational need, which must come first. I invite the Minister to visit Gaelscoil Uí Néill and Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh in County Tyrone, if he is in the Magherafelt area.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McElduff, your time is up.

Mr Ford: The Assembly may have only been in existence for just over three years, but a few rituals seem to be developing — the annual Budget process, the annual Programme for Government process and now the annual get-at-the-Minister-over-the-allocation-of-schools-capital-fundi process.

That speculation will continue, and the concern will remain, until either we get adequate funds for our needs or we see more openness, accountability and transparency in the operation of the process. It is easy to identify the schools at the top of the priority scale

where, for example, there is a need for a new building in an area with a growing population. Too many schools are clustered in the middle of the priority range in which competition is, unfortunately, seen as sectoral. Until it is clear how the decisions for those schools in the middle of the range are made, this kind of debate will continue.

The criteria applied by the Department must be spelt out clearly, with an understanding that they apply across all sectors. There are many concerns — not all in the one direction — about one school apparently being favoured over another. The Department must spell out how it balances the claims made by five different boards, with not only the ordinary controlled schools, if I may put it that way, but the special needs schools to be looked after — not to mention the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and umpteen voluntary grammar schools, each looking after their own interests.

I am unclear as to how the priority lists that are supposed to apply in each board, or within CCMS or NICIE, are dealt with by the Department. I have a constituency interest in that Loanends Primary School, outside Templepatrick, is near the top of the North Eastern Education and Library Board's priority list, but I have no way of knowing whether it will be at the top when it reaches the Department's priority list.

Similarly, I am aware of the need for work to be done on Hillcroft Special School. Eileen Bell will be extremely annoyed if I do not also mention Tor Bank in her constituency. Unless we know how the special schools are dealt with and whether they are taken on the same or a separate basis, it is impossible to know what is a realistic assessment.

The proposer of the motion referred to his concerns that integrated schools are lumped in with controlled schools. He thought that advocates of integrated education should be concerned about that situation on a sectarian basis. I think that I may rightly claim to be one of the advocates of integrated education in the House, but what concerns me much more is the fact that those who tabled the motion have adopted a sectarian, point-scoring way of dealing with the issues. It is not a matter of how schools are lumped together — it is a matter of whether needs are being met, or whether we are simply reiterating sectarian attitudes in the House. I find it difficult to see the second sentence of the motion as anything but sectarian point-scoring and sectional pleading.

I am not interested in the pattern of spending over recent years; I am interested in the schools with the greatest need this year, on an objective assessment, getting the money. If that means that maintained schools get more money two or three years in a row

because they have objective need, that is correct. If it is controlled schools that get more money for two or three years in a row from now on because they have more need, that is also correct.

If integrated schools — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Ford: — receive more money because they have more need, that is also correct. It is time that the Unionist Members moved away from treating everything to do with education as sectarian point-scoring. That is what the motion does. I support Mr Gallagher's amendment, because it states that we should address concerns about lack of funding and moves away from inappropriate sectional pleading.

The major issues concern how we get the necessary funds to deal with the backlog, how the priorities are drawn up and how the process is seen to be open and transparent. However, if the Minister wants to make progress, he must ensure that the entire process is seen to be transparent. He must ensure that the House addresses the needs of children instead of engaging in sectarian point-scoring.

Mr Foster: The debate is interesting, and I support the motion. The Prime Minister said that his priorities were, "Education, education, education", and I agree with him. It was interesting to hear Mr McElduff say that the motion is seriously flawed. Does anyone believe that Mr McElduff is not what he accuses others of being? We can make up our own minds about that.

I am concerned about the lack of capital spending for schools in general, but there is undoubted under-investment in the controlled sector. I seek equality for all. We talk about openness and transparency, of which I approve. However, I am becoming cynical and unconvinced about the action, intent or meaning that emanate from such choice words.

I am also concerned about the lack of capital expenditure available to at least two schools in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Although there are others, my first example is Fivemiletown High School. Fivemiletown school has been the most successful educational establishment in the Clogher valley for many years. It has provided first-class education for the area, but, given its facilities, its teachers are battling against the odds. The school buildings are sub-standard, which is unacceptable. We do not want to let such a fine educational establishment fail after so many years of excellence. That would be a crying shame and unforgivable.

There are 430 pupils enrolled at that successful school. There are still 15 mobile classrooms in the school complex. The board of governors has a go-ahead attitude, and over the years it has taken the initiative to augment the existing facilities by running an internal fund-raising programme. Moneys amounting to £100,000 have

been raised on occasion to make provision for the students. To the governors' credit, no finance for the works came from the school budget.

Optimism was raised in 1995 when detailed architectural plans for a new building were produced. Bore holes were drilled and samples taken, which suggested an imminent start to the project. In 2000, the school topped the Southern Education and Library Board's list for new building work. However, in March 2001, it was established that the school was not among those listed for pending work. That left people asking "Why? Oh why?"

The burning question for those involved with that school is why the school disappeared from the original list. That fine school continues to operate, but it does so under extremely poor conditions. Last year its top student obtained 5 grade As at A level. Such achievements must not be lost because of a lack of money for new buildings. That would be damning for the people who allowed it to happen.

We must have conditions that keep with the needs of the sort of commendable education provision that has been displayed by Fivemiletown High School for more than 40 years. Immediate action is undoubtedly required at that school.

My second example is the integrated primary school in Enniskillen. I recently wrote to the Minister, and he replied to my letter. However, I implore him to action urgent new build for that school, which provides good primary education, albeit in temporary classrooms.

I urge the Minister to act immediately to rectify the problems in those two schools so that the admirable tuition that is provided there will not be nullified. Capital expenditure is needed immediately if teachers, students and society are to benefit fully. Underfunding affects educational and academic potential, regardless of age, ability or attitude. The Assembly must not inhibit the children of Northern Ireland's progress. I support the motion.

Mr Fee: Many Members, including the mover of the motion, used words such as "equity", "equality", "fairness" and "openness". Everyone agrees with those objectives. They also agree with the first part of the motion. The capital programme continues to be affected by a resource problem. Much work is needed, and many schools are sub-standard. The Assembly, collectively, wants to see that problem solved.

However, under no circumstances would I accept the prioritisation by a Minister of Education of capital funding for schools based on sectarian criteria. The second part of the motion asks the Minister to make decisions on a blatantly offensive and sectarian basis. I reject the second part of the motion and support the amendment that was tabled by my Colleague Mr Gallagher.

Members have issued many allegations against the Department of Education and the Minister. I have no brief to defend the Minister of Education. However, the Committee for Education should take account of the evidence that it receives regularly, and of the evidence that has been published. If it believes that it is being lied to, it should put its money where its mouth is and give the Assembly the relevant statistics. The published figures show that, since 1997, 32 projects were carried out in the controlled sector, six in the voluntary sector, 24 in the Catholic maintained sector and six in the other sectors.

Come on boys. The Chairperson of the Committee for Education, when he was wearing his Ulster Unionist hat, said that the figures looked pretty good. The figures undermine any allegation of systematic discrimination. Members have stood up, one after the other, like a Mexican wave around the Chamber, to name the underfunded schools in their constituency. Among them was Rev Dr William McCrea — the House knows that schools in his constituency are underfunded. Members are welcome to visit areas such as Jonesborough or Drumatee, where similar conditions exist. If Members simply want to gripe about schools in their own constituencies that need capital investment, the motion should say that. Let us not wrap up the debate in allegations of systematic sectarian manipulation of the capital investment fund — that is not taking place.

Other real problems exist in respect of how the final list of schools reaches the Minister's desk, where decisions are made. Each education and library board, the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (NICCEA), and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) have their own criteria for prioritising — for example, the state of the roof of a school, the need for proper play facilities, demographics and the state of long-term enrolment, and the need to provide for disabled children or those with learning problems.

Certain boards prioritise on the basis of how high on the planning list a school might be. On the grounds of efficacy in getting a project through, the board might choose a project that is highly developed but not necessarily the most needy. There must be a clear statement that all decisions will be made on the basis of need to create an appropriate educational environment for every child, regardless of school or sector. There must be clear, published, agreed assessment criteria across all the education bodies involved. An increase in the efficiency and accessibility of professional management for the planning and implementation of those projects is needed.

We certainly need a much more professional approach on the part of the Department and on the part of the boards of governors that are introducing those projects.

2.45 pm

There are problems. I do not like the way in which the capital investment programme is put together. I do not even know all the criteria that the Minister uses. However, I am fairly sure that there has been no sectarian bias over the past five years.

Mr Morrow: I support the motion. I am absolutely amazed at some of Mr Fee's comments. I suspect that if funding were distorted against his community in the way that it has been against the controlled sector, he would not make such remarks. Anyone with even half a head can see that there is a serious imbalance. Schools in the controlled sector seem to be relegated to the second class and do not seem to matter any more.

I want to pick up Mr Foster's theme. I support his comments on the two schools that he mentioned. Fivemiletown High School has an academic success rate that is second to none. However, the school also has a long track record of self-help. It is not a school that waits for things to happen. When funding did not come forward, the staff, community and pupils provided many things for the school. Had it not been for such endeavours, Fivemiletown High School would probably be uninhabitable for students.

In 1972, in the absence of Government funding, the school provided its own outdoor swimming pool, which was entirely financed through internal funding. There was no Government support or encouragement to get on with the work. In 1975-76, as a result of increased pupil numbers, additional classrooms were provided and the need for a building extension was identified. Between 1978 and 1980, the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) produced a building extension plan. Between 1982 and 1984, almost half the pupils were taught in mobile classrooms.

If that is not a serious case of deprivation and underfunding, I do not know what is. In 1985, an up-to-date report stated that there was no progress on the building project. By 1994, the project was no further on. The outdoor swimming pool was completely enclosed at a cost of £100,000. Again, most of that money came from fund-raising. In 1995, a deputation to the then Minister of Education, Mr Ancram, highlighted the need for additional funding. By 2000, the school had crept up to the top of the SELB's list for a new building.

Then the current Minister made his announcement. Was Fivemiletown High School to get its fair allocation? The answer was "No". The school has been listed as category 3 — a seriously sub-standard school. Among the identified needs are a scheme to address the shortfall in permanent accommodation and the need to improve subject areas for a long-term enrolment of some 500 pupils. Despite that, Fivemiletown High School is not mentioned in the Minister's list of priorities.

Mr Fee should rethink his comments and take a long, hard, in-depth look at exactly what is happening with funding for the controlled sector. I suspect that, when he takes a balanced view, he will not come up with the result that he mentioned — he may even want to support the motion.

I have been approached by the integrated school in Enniskillen. That school has also been neglected. I am absolutely convinced, and have no hesitation in saying, that funding should be directed to where it is needed. That is all we ask for, but it is not happening. I am amazed to see the amendment try to sectarianise and politicise the motion. The motion is neither sectarian nor political.

We want only a fair and equitable distribution of funding for the controlled sector. I refer to the two schools mentioned earlier, and I trust that when priority needs have been reassessed Fivemiletown will be given its proper place on the list.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support Mr Gallagher's amendment, as well as the amendment that was tabled by Mr McElduff and myself. They are much more accurate than the motion. The drift of the motion does not surprise me — it is visited annually in a similar guise — and it is far from anything agreed at Committee level. It concerns advocating bias and sectarianism. We have tried to move away from that, but the motion perpetuates what we had in the past.

Capital spending is directed to schools on the basis of educational need and not on the basis of to what sector the school belongs. To do otherwise would direct funding away from the needy and allocate it on a sectarian basis. The Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights reported in 1996 that the amount of temporary teaching accommodation in Catholic schools was three times that in Protestant schools. Such discrepancy was the result of decades of discrimination against Catholic schools by successive Unionist Governments. Unionists are in denial if they refuse to accept that their past policies are responsible for the legacy of underfunding in the Catholic maintained sector.

Schools in the controlled sector with a good case for capital funding must put such cases to the Department of Education. It would be tragic if the schools and their pupils were treated unfairly because of poor representation by those responsible for education. That is true for thousands of children in the controlled sector who are subjected to the transfer procedure, as well as for those whose school premises are unsatisfactory. The situation in Ardoyne has had a massive impact on the overall budget, and that in turn impacts on the schools budget.

Ardoyne is only one area where there is social deprivation. Communities in socially deprived or underdeveloped areas — TSN areas — should seek equality

and free school meals. A recent article in the 'News Letter' threw out a challenge to Unionism. It stated that "loyalist working classes have always been ignored by mainstream unionism."

It went on to say that the Unionist working class was used as mere electoral fodder for the political elite, and that both political parties in mainstream unionism remain irredeemably middle class in outlook and policy.

Why do people such as Sammy Wilson argue for the retention of the 11-plus selection system? That system has failed the people in those deprived areas. Why does he not argue for TSN spending and free school meals, which will help to improve the budgets of schools in such areas and save money for capital spend on schools that need to be built.

Everyone supports an increase in the overall budgets of schools. However, the areas that need new schools must be represented. Schools must put their cases factually, in time and in full, ready for implementation.

Have those who tabled of the motion ever asked for a quality impact assessment? If they have not done so, the reason is probably that it would destroy their sectarian arguments, which have no foundation in fact. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs I Robinson: My Colleague Sammy Wilson will respond to the comments of the previous Member to speak.

Few issues have caused as much disquiet and anger as Martin McGuinness's appointment to serve as Minister of Education in Northern Ireland. That development sent a shock wave around the Province and prompted many accusations that the Department of Education would be run to Mr McGuinness's personal agenda and that state schools — controlled schools — which cater for the majority of the Protestant community, would be discriminated against in favour of the Catholic maintained and Irish-medium sectors. Some individuals castigated those who followed that school of thought and lauded the success of devolution and the return of what they called "accountable government".

Why are we debating the issue today? What has happened in the past few years to cause Members to doubt the integrity and ability of the Minister of Education? We are here today for the same reason that was voiced three years ago: that IRA/Sinn Féin would not operate the Department of Education on the principles of equity and fairness.

Like a footballer, one is only as good as one's last game. Therefore, we should not prejudge the Minister's performance. We should consider his recent record. The Minister inherited a portfolio that had experienced a huge deficit in the funding that was allocated to state schools, which mainly cater for the Unionist community, and in the funding that was allocated to the maintained

and integrated sectors, which mainly cater for the Nationalist community.

In the five years prior to his appointment, a total of £230 million was provided for education, of which only £50 million was allocated to state schools. A mere 21% of all moneys granted was allocated to the schools that provide education to more than 50% of primary school children. It may have been fair to assume that, as a party so obsessed with equality and fairness, IRA/Sinn Féin would have taken the necessary action to counter that blatant discrimination. However, of the £72 million announced in 2000-01, only £27.7 million was given to the state sector, while £40.3 million was given to the maintained sector. Even on that basis the Minister was found wanting, because £14.4 million of the funding for the state sector was included in the previous year's allocation.

As predicted, IRA/Sinn Féin's commitment to equality continued — but only if one is a Nationalist. A total school investment package of £62.5 million was announced on 1 March. Only £14.3 million was allocated to the state sector. The Executive programme funds for schools and youth services capital projects that were announced on 2 April did not improve the situation. Of the total allocation of £20 million, only £2 million was directed to the state sector. It is an incredible situation that, unfortunately, was all too inevitable. It has led to an enormous backlog of urgent projects, and several projects in my constituency come to mind immediately.

Dundonald Primary School was built in the 1930s to cater for a few hundred pupils. The school now has 600 pupils, 200 of whom receive their education in mobile classrooms that are more than 30 years old and are in a dreadful state of disrepair. They provide an environment that neither pupils nor staff should have to tolerate. Toilet facilities are also abysmal. The school has more than 50 members of staff: female staff are provided with two toilets and one hand basin, and male staff have access to one toilet and one hand basin. That is unacceptable.

Tor Bank Special School in Dundonald provides education for 168 pupils with severe learning difficulties, who are aged from three years of age to 19 years of age. It was built in 1968 with facilities for eight classes. However, today there are 17 classes, eight of which are housed in mobile classrooms. The children who attend Tor Bank have specific needs, and in order to make the most of their abilities there must be total co-operation between parents, teaching staff and health professionals. Each time pupils need to go to the toilet or for lunch, they must either walk or be pushed in their wheelchairs up the steep hill on which the school is located. That is not conducive to the delivery of an acceptable level of education.

I support the motion.

3.00 pm

Mr Gibson: This afternoon has been interesting because we have seen that, when it suits the occasion, the SDLP and Sinn Féin will unite. They have been caught in the act of discriminating, and they are howling, just as they have howled on every occasion for the past few decades.

We need investment of more than £1 billion, half of which is required for new building and half of which is required for repairs. For three decades we have had to spend money on repairing the destruction that the IRA caused. The SDLP has piggybacked the IRA's violent efforts. All the money was misdirected — it had to be spent on compensation, replacing buildings and trying to repair the results of the IRA's destructive efforts. And when it was given power, the IRA is just as destructive. If the same thing were to happen in their sector, Nationalists would be howling and making the same allegations. Therefore Mr Gallagher's amendment, supported by Mr Fee, is just as bogus and invalid as the amendment that Barry McElduff wished to table.

A 3:1 ratio for investment is neither fair nor equitable, and the system is not transparent. To point that out has been an annual ritual, but we will have to make it a daily ritual until it gets through to the thick skulls of those in charge of administration that it is no longer acceptable.

The little primary school that my children went to in Beragh had to fight to get toilets. Only a matter of years ago the school still had outside toilets. Following a hard struggle, someone, condescendingly, allowed the school to have flushable toilets. The school outside Dervaghroy is more than 100 years old, and rationalisation has still to be announced. There are old schools in rural west Tyrone that have yet to be provided with modern educational facilities.

The Minister must look at other means of funding. If he cannot fight his battle in the Executive, he must look at how else to raise more than £1 billion. The best way to solve the problem is to ensure adequate provision. That would remove the possibility or allegation of bias. At present, the approach is biased. The debate has turned into the usual bigoted onslaught that we have come to expect, because when they are wrong, that is, predictably, how they defend themselves.

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion and to the points that Members have raised. It is no secret that considerable resources are required to address the substantial investment needed in building work across the schools estate. My Department and I

acknowledge that, and we are encouraged by Members' recognition of the problem.

The problem is not confined to the need for investment in major works. It extends to minor capital works and maintenance. The education and library boards estimate that investment of around £84 million is needed in minor capital work and £120 million in high priority maintenance work across the controlled and maintained school sectors. In addition, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools has recently submitted around 200 applications for funding for minor capital work in maintained schools next year. That, combined with the amount of investment needed in major capital works, is the legacy of decades of underinvestment that I and the rest of the Executive have inherited and are now beginning to tackle.

Danny Kennedy raised that issue in his contribution. I found his contribution surprising because I have never experienced the bile and the vitriol that he has displayed today in the meetings of the Committee for Education, of which he is the Chairperson. He has had many opportunities during those meetings with me to raise those issues with the same fervour that he has raised them today, and he has never done so.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr M McGuinness: I will not give way. Resources are limited, and I have sought and received additional resources from the Executive. I will continue to seek more resources under the 2002 spending review. In the light of the 2000 spending review, things will be tight not only for my Department but for the entire Executive.

Danny Kennedy mentioned special schools and controlled schools. Special schools and controlled integrated schools are under the control of the education and library boards. He also raised the issue of education and library board projects that have been rejected. To be a contender, a board needs an economic appraisal and development proposal where relevant. It also needs to be allocated funds, and in order for that to happen, it must have sufficient planning and sufficient priority in respect of educational need. A further issue is the state of readiness of several schemes that the education and library boards have advanced, and I intend to take that up with them.

Although the largest part of the capital programme is directed to major capital works across all sectors, it must also be recognised that substantial funds are made available to education and library boards to undertake work in controlled schools, and to meet boards' responsibilities for furnishing and equipping controlled and maintained schools for school transport and for school meals accommodation.

My Department is committed to improving the schools estate, but the number and the cost of major projects

competing for a place in the capital programme far exceeds the resources available. Each year's programme is directed largely towards new schools, schools rationalisation, the replacement of sub-standard accommodation and to ensure that pupils and teachers are provided with a proper learning environment. My Department's commitment is reflected significantly in the school building programme that is announced each year.

In particular, over the past three years, funding of more than £200 million has been allocated under the conventional building programme, and a further £70 million under public-private partnerships. Moreover, £16 million has been allocated from Executive programme funds.

Over the past six years, boards have spent more than £200 million on school maintenance — an increase of 20% on previous years — and they are working towards a 10% annual reduction on the maintenance backlog under their resource allocation plans. The major capital development needs of schools are prioritised in the schools' capital priorities planning list, which has been developed in consultation with the education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and other schools interests. The capital development process is not initiated by my Department but by approaches from the boards, the CCMS and individual schools about the need for capital works. They are then drawn together, categorised by my Department and agreed with the boards and CCMS. The planning list plays an important part in the allocation of resources. At present, there are 98 projects with an estimated construction cost of some £500 million in the top three categories of the planning list: one in category 1; 11 in category 2; and 86 in category 3. The projects in category 3 can be broken down into 38 controlled schools — including 11 special schools — 24 maintained schools, 16 voluntary grammar schools, four integrated schools and four Irish-medium schools.

The backlog of work is even greater if the 80 other projects in categories 4 and 5 of the planning list are taken into account. Members should be in no doubt that I am aware of the need in all sectors. However, Members will recognise that, with so many projects competing for funding, it is impossible to meet all their needs within the available resources. The existing finite resources must be allocated on the basis of educational need, wherever it exists.

David Ford raised the issue of criteria and transparency; the priorities are published on my Department's web site. It makes it absolutely clear that there are five categories. It outlines the number of projects: one in category 1; 11 in category 2; and 86 in category 3.

Category 3 is a broad mix of primary and post-primary projects. Of course the decisions are complex, but they are based on the priorities that are expressed by the education and library boards and the CCMS, as well as

on professional advice on educational suitability, physical condition, temporary accommodation, and of course, the Programme for Government priorities.

The criteria for determining each year's capital programme include not only educational priority, but the state of readiness of individual projects as regards planning, their cost and affordability, and, not least, the available capital resources. However, the key factor, as I have stressed before, is educational need. That is reflected in the provision of sufficient school places, appropriate teaching and curriculum facilities, and secure, healthy and suitable conditions that are conducive to teaching and learning. Educational need affects all our children, and it is paramount in my consideration of the capital programme.

My Department consults the education and library boards and the CCMS because they represent the majority of schools on the planning list and their capital priorities. Advice is also sought from the Education and Training Inspectorate and the Department's professional advisers about the relative educational needs of the competing priorities, and I must also take account of what we are trying to achieve under the Programme for Government; for example, the reduction of the number of temporary classrooms across the schools estate, targeting social need and other equality issues.

We all share a commitment to improving the schools estate. However, I again point to the number and the cost of major projects that are competing for a place on each year's capital programme and the fact that the costs far exceed the available resources — hence the need for resources to be directed to the highest priorities based on educational need.

As I pointed out last year, and as Members recognise, the backlog of work on school building projects cannot be addressed by conventional procurement means alone. I shall re-examine the possibility of clearing some of that backlog through further programmes under public-private procurement. That could supplement and complement the conventional building programme, and therefore permit more work to be carried out across the schools estate.

Tommy Gallagher raised the issue of progress on projects that were announced last year. Project boards and teams have been set up for all three projects. They are engaging consultants to assist in the preparation of their respective outline business cases, and it is expected that the Southern Education and Library Board and the Derry diocese projects will go to the official journal of the European Union in April and May; the North Eastern Education and Library Board project, which has encountered some land problems, will go early in the summer.

I wish to make it clear that my Department's capital budget is not determined on a religious or sectoral

basis: resources are directed to educational priority needs in all school sectors.

I also wish to comment on statements that have been made about imbalances in the allocation of capital funds. I say again that I absolutely refute any suggestion of bias in the allocation of capital resources among schools. Allocations are based on educational need. The suggestion, which has been made again today, that resources be applied on a sectoral basis is effectively asking that I elevate schools with lesser need over schools with a greater educational need.

3.15 pm

I am not prepared to do that. It would be unjust and discriminatory. I am not prepared to discriminate against those in greatest need. There was enough of that in the past. In any one year, one sector may receive more funding or more schemes than another. However, we must not let that distract us from the imperative of allocating resources on the basis of educational need. Members may wish to note that over the past 10 years, the capital programme has been spread across 64 controlled schools, 47 maintained schools, 14 voluntary grammar schools, eight integrated schools and one Irish-medium school.

No decisions have yet been taken about next year's capital programme. However, I met the Committee for Education last week, and I hope to announce the programme next month after I have had an opportunity to consider the Committee's views. It is also most unfortunate that one of those Members who tabled this motion, who is also the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education, failed to attend that meeting. Therefore he did not avail himself of the opportunity to discuss this year's programme with me.

I hope that this information gives Members a better understanding of the backlog of capital works and the genuine difficulties that we face in trying to meet the needs of all schools. Members can be assured that I am keenly aware of the existing underinvestment in schools in all sectors. The Executive are also aware of it. That is a debate that occurs regularly among us. I will press for more resources, while continuing to ensure that resources are directed to schools with the greatest educational need.

Mr Gallagher: I call once again for support for the amendment, which recognises that a solution cannot be based on a sectoral approach. That is something with which many Members have agreed in the course of the debate, and which every Member realises to be the case. Representatives of all the different sectors — controlled, integrated, Irish-medium and maintained — also agree that a solution cannot be found along the lines of a sectoral approach.

As has been exemplified during the debate, the amendment allows us to raise our common concerns about capital development and about the poor state of many classrooms right across the school landscape. It recognises an urgent need for more funding, and it also allows us all to recognise that those schools with the greatest need should have first call on funding allocations. Some Members who spoke in support of the motion agreed with that.

I want to reject completely the remarks made by Oliver Gibson. I want to remind him that the SDLP has always promoted and supported equality of opportunity, and it continues to do so. It is ludicrous to suggest that the SDLP would in some way be involved in discriminating against schools in the controlled sector in relation to any aspect of their business, but particularly in relation to the capital spending programme.

Members raised some interesting points. It is clear that there are great concerns in every constituency about the circumstances and conditions in which young children must be educated. For example, many concerns were voiced about the planning process by my Colleague John Fee and by David Ford, to mention just two. I reiterate: there are very real concerns that some of our most needy schools do not see their plans implemented quickly enough.

Many Members mentioned transparency, and that is important. The Minister clarified the different categories of schools. It is useful to know that categories 1 and 2 are at the top and are likely to receive funding. It has happened that some schools in category 3 get lifted up into the funding allocation. The Minister said that there are about 80 schools in that category, which leaves about 79 disappointed schools asking why they were not chosen instead. That is a difficult but important issue, and it necessitates further work.

The amendment is going in the right direction to tackle underfunding across all sectors.

Mr S Wilson: Several Members have talked about this motion as the “annual get-at-the-Minister” or the “annual ritual on capital spending”. They are right. This is the third time that this issue has been raised in the Assembly. On every occasion that this Minister has had the opportunity to announce capital spending, he has reverted to the same old sectarian pattern of discrimination against schools that cater mostly for Protestants. It will be raised again this year, and it will be raised again next year, if the Minister continues to behave in the way that he has suggested he will.

Several Members have tried to defend the Minister. Mr Fee was the most explicit with the figures. His use of figures is as twisted as the Minister’s. He started from 1997. However, it seems to have escaped his notice that the Minister was not responsible for funds in 1997. In the years during which the Minister has

been responsible, a very distinct pattern emerges. I want to address that pattern.

It is very significant that all the Members who defended the Minister said that they did not know what the criterion was or how it was defined. It was almost like an act of faith in the Minister. They would not believe that he would do it, and the reason for their faith was that the imbalance was in the sector that catered mostly for the Catholic community. That is why they were prepared to place their faith in the Minister. The Minister says that he totally refutes those allegations, but he does not give us any reason to believe him. He also refuted the fact that he handed out nail bombs on Bloody Sunday, and now people say that they got them from his hands.

Let us look at the facts. In the first year that the Minister was responsible for capital spending, there were 10 projects in schools catering mostly for the Protestant community, and those amounted to £27.7 million. Of that sum, £14.3 million had already been announced by previous Ministers or was money that the Minister said he would spend when he got it some time in the future. It was not real money. Six projects in the sector dealing mostly with Catholic communities amounted to £40.3 million. In the first year there was an imbalance of three to one.

In the second year there was an improvement. The Minister announced seven projects for schools catering mostly for Protestant communities that amounted to £12.5 million and six projects for schools catering mostly for Catholic communities that amounted to £25.7 million. That was an imbalance of two to one. In April 2001 the Minister got extra money from the Executive programme funds.

A total of £2 million went to schools that cater predominantly for Protestants, and £11.1 million went to schools that cater predominantly for Catholics — that is an imbalance of five to one. He then says that he refutes the allegations. I have his figures with me. He cannot refute them; they are there in black and white. I obtained them from his Department’s press releases. The allegations stand.

I suspect that the Minister aims to do the same again this year. He does not want a debate. He hates debate. He hates scrutiny. He would rather be under the stone, away from scrutiny. That is why he refuses to answer questions when he is taken into custody on occasion. He also wants to refuse to answer questions here. What will he do this year? He will make the announcement on 21 March, just before the Assembly rises for recess. He is the Jo Moore of Sinn Féin. He tries to bury bad news on a day when it cannot be subjected to public scrutiny. Let me tell him this: if this must be a ritual next year, it will, because I want to demand justice for all schoolchildren in Northern

Ireland. There is need in the controlled sector, and there is need in schools that cater mostly for Protestants, just as there is need in other schools. The Minister has to face up to that, and he has to do justice —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up, Mr Wilson.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 29; Noes 42

AYES

Alex Attwood, Eileen Bell, P J Bradley, Seamus Close, John Dallat, Bairbre de Brún, Arthur Doherty, Sean Farren, John Fee, David Ford, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Joe Hendron, Gerry Kelly, John Kelly, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMenamin, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Brid Rodgers, John Tierney.

NOES

Ian Adamson, Pauline Armitage, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, Sam Foster, Oliver Gibson, Tom Hamilton, William Hay, David Hilditch, Derek Hussey, Billy Hutchinson, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Danny Kennedy, David McClarty, William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Ken Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, George Savage, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Jim Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 43; Noes 30

AYES

Ian Adamson, Pauline Armitage, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, David Ervine, Sam Foster, Oliver Gibson, Tom Hamilton, William Hay, David Hilditch, Derek Hussey, Billy Hutchinson, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Danny Kennedy, David McClarty, William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Ken Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, George Savage, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Jim Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

NOES

Alex Attwood, Eileen Bell, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Seamus Close, John Dallat, Bairbre de Brún, Arthur Doherty, Sean Farren, John Fee, David Ford, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Joe Hendron, Gerry Kelly, John Kelly, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMenamin, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Brid Rodgers, John Tierney.

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the backlog of capital works required for school buildings across all geographic areas and all sectors of education in Northern Ireland. The Assembly asks the Minister of Education to take note of the underinvestment in the controlled sector and the pattern of capital spending announcements in recent years when deciding upon the allocation of money for school building in March 2002.

PART-TIME WORKERS' PENSION RIGHTS

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I tabled an amendment to this motion. Why has the Speaker's Office rejected that amendment?

Mr Deputy Speaker: As I said earlier, it is not for the Speaker's Office to say why that decision was made.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly supports the right of all part-time workers to a pension scheme with employer contributions.

This motion speaks for itself. I am not going to labour the point. In this day and age, part-time workers should not be excluded from pension rights. Research shows that the majority of part-time workers are female. Therefore, there is a double agenda. Discrimination against part-time workers also discriminates against females.

In May 2000, the European Court of Justice ruled that part-time workers should have access to occupational pension schemes. Indeed, it was decided that that access could be backdated to 1976. There was some outcry about the cost to employers.

That aside, the motion speaks for itself. Today, when we are seeing the collapse of pensions — company pensions are increasingly devalued, state pensions are disappearing, personal pensions are the disaster story of the 1990s and stakeholder pensions are going nowhere — the situation is much worse for part-time workers.

As the dynamics of the workplace change, there is an increasing trend for people to work part-time. There are more people opting for part-time work for social and other reasons. Those people have practically no pension rights. Employers are reaping the benefits of having a part-time workforce, but they have no responsibility to contribute to part-time pensions. The result is increasingly catastrophic for part-time workers. Pensions are being devalued as the Assembly stands here and talks. The results of that particular agenda, if it continues, will be disastrous for decades to come.

Society consigns people to the rubbish heap when they retire. Those people have paid taxes and National Insurance contributions. Society is now attempting to consign to the rubbish heap those who work part-time. There is a responsibility towards retired people. British dogma places that responsibility entirely on the individual. Often, however, the individual is not in a position to ensure adequate provision. That ultimately costs the public purse, due to increased ill health among the elderly and added pressure on social services. That is happening increasingly.

Although we can only attempt to deal with the issues of the elderly and those who receive devalued pensions,

there is an opportunity to ensure that we put it right for part-time workers — they have a right to a pension fund. The state is steadily withdrawing from making adequate pension provisions. Business has abdicated its responsibilities; it shoulders one of the lowest levels of social costs anywhere in Europe. That has been facilitated by British economic orthodoxy.

The Assembly has a simple choice. Does it let the situation of part-time workers continue to deteriorate, or does it act? It is a simple motion and a well-defined situation. Everyone is aware of the dilemma and the plight of part-time workers. I ask that the Assembly give its assent to the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr Birnie: I will start by speaking as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. Although the motion is cross-cutting — I understand that the Minister for Social Development will respond to it — insofar as the issue of employment rights arises, the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Committee for Social Development are certainly strongly involved and concerned.

We should all be grateful to Mr John Kelly for raising several important issues. However, there are some problems with the wording of the motion, and I will come to that shortly. That may in part reflect the truly complex nature of pensions. We all probably realised that when we watched the television advertisements produced by the Department for Social Development featuring the two talking sheepdogs in which we were advised of the need for all of us to make adequate pension provision for the future. That future is closer for some Members than for others, but it affects us all.

There are around 150,000 part-time workers in Northern Ireland, representing one in four of the total workforce. As the mover of the motion rightly said, the vast majority of those — around 125,000 — are women, so there are associated equality issues in that regard. I have no doubt that the Employment and Learning Committee fully accepts the equity principle, whereby part-time workers should be treated fairly in relation to comparable full-timers. Indeed — and this is a crucial point — the reverse is true, in that full-timers should not be disadvantaged in relation to part-timers.

The motion appears to call for something that has already been conceded in principle — through the European Court of Justice cases in 1994 and 2000, for example. Furthermore, as Mr Kelly knows from his membership of the Employment and Learning Committee, the part-time work Directive was incorporated into Northern Ireland law in July 2001 through the Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001. The Directive established the legally enforceable application of equal treatment of each part-timer with a comparable

full-timer. That applies not only to pensions, but to wages, holiday rights, training, and so on.

Although I support some of Mr Kelly's sentiments, I feel — personally rather than as Chairperson of the Committee — unhappy with the wording of the motion. A literal reading implies a right for all part-timers that not all full-timers currently have. Therefore the motion would replace one possible inequity with a new one.

As I said, the equal treatment principle has been established in Northern Ireland and UK law, following on from EU law. However, a tricky issue arises: how far back should retrospective obligations fall on employers, with all the associated costs? The background research papers mention Ruth Lea of the Institute of Directors, who referred to the impact on companies. If employers are loaded with a retrospective cost that they could not reasonably have been expected to anticipate, there is the danger that one of two undesirable things could happen.

First, the wage levels of existing employees could be reduced because companies have a fixed fund of money from which to meet the wages of the existing workforce and pension payments and contributions. If one goes up, the other will have to go down.

4.00 pm

Secondly, companies that are on the edge of remaining competitive could be forced out of operation and jobs could be lost.

Another limiting aspect of the motion is that it may represent an attempt to catch up with a model of pensions that is in decline. The mover of the motion referred to that but perhaps drew a different conclusion to the one that I drew. That point was made recently in the press. In 'The Economist' on 16 February, there was a very good survey of the future of pensions across the industrial world. Similarly, the business section of the 'Belfast Telegraph' of 19 February referred to some of those issues. In general, so-called final, salary-defined benefit pensions are on the wane. In many ways that is to be regretted, but there are deep economic forces to explain it. I am not clear that any motion made today will necessarily change such trends.

I also argue that although the motion — rightly, within its limits — focuses on the pensions of part-timers, other groups in the labour force, such as agency workers and fixed-term contract workers, have equally legitimate concerns. They are not, however, mentioned in the motion. Perhaps the issue of pensions should be dealt with in the round.

Therefore I cannot support the motion at this point, but I appreciate some of the sentiments behind it.

Mr Dallat: Although many part-time workers enjoy good working conditions, others do not. In the past, pension schemes for part-time workers were rare; it

was not considered appropriate to include them. That is now regarded as a gross miscarriage of justice.

The previous Tory Government spearheaded the campaign to deny part-time workers any rights, even the right to pay National Insurance contributions. The full impact of Tory misrule comes to light only now. In the past few days it has been disclosed that the pension rights of millions of part-time workers were torn up and consigned to the bin with the consent and approval of an uncaring Government. Many of those workers are at or near pensionable age and will be totally dependent on the Government for survival and a meagre existence, instead of being comfortably off with a healthy pension.

On 30 June 2000, Dr Seán Farren, then Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, said in his announcement of new rights for part-time workers that

"Part-timers must be valued just as highly as their full-time counterparts. Many employers already do just that; but these Regulations will ensure that part-time workers are given their full rights by all employers, and are protected against unjustified discrimination."

Dr Farren went on to say that part-timers would have rights to the same hourly rate as comparable full-time workers. They would enjoy the same access to occupational pension schemes, as well as the same access to training and the same entitlement to annual leave. Part-timers would also have the same rights to parental and maternity leave pro rata.

That announcement was of fundamental importance, because it set in motion a complete rethink of how part-time workers were to be treated. For the first time, it was acknowledged that part-timers make an enormous contribution to flexibility in the labour market, which enables the economy to function more efficiently. Surely that is in everyone's interest.

There should be no differentiation in pension rights between part-time and full-time workers. However, as Dr Birnie pointed out, the problem does not only relate to part-timers but to many full-timers.

The disclosure to which I referred earlier is testimony that many people have lost their basic pension rights. Although the Tories are long gone, there is still serious reluctance among employers to recognise that it is in their best interests, and those of their employees, to operate pension schemes that offer workers a reasonable income at the time of their lives when they most need it.

The Government have failed to provide adequate tax relief options to make pension schemes more attractive. They have done nothing to address the problems that small businesses face when considering pension schemes for their employees. Unless they have arranged their own private pension schemes, thousands of people, who often work in the construction industry and are registered as self-employed, are also outside the loop.

The struggle for basic rights for part-time workers has been long and protracted. We need only remember the way in which ancillary staff were treated in our schools. They received neither pension rights nor holiday pay. In a world that is ruled by multinationals that fulfil the needs of their shareholders long before they consider the rights of their employees, there is a long way to go before total equality exists for everyone.

The terms “full-time” and “part-time” no longer distinguish between different groups of workers. Many people with the responsibility of a full-time occupation work few hours. University lecturers, who spend no more than 16 hours in the lecture theatre, would be most displeased if they were described as part-timers, and rightly so. Even the state has it wrong. It insists that people must work for at least 16 hours per week to qualify for family tax credit.

The cost of implementing pension rights for all workers is a factor, and the Government have a critical role to play in that. Not all employers are in a position to carry such a burden, and it is the Government's responsibility to intervene to sort out those issues. The principle of pension rights for part-time workers should not be an issue. The problem lies in how pension rights for part-time workers are implemented and funded, and it is for Westminster to sort that out. Just as there is inequality among workers, there is inequality among employers. However, that is no excuse for doing nothing.

Mr Paisley Jnr: My party agrees in principle that all part-time workers should have the same rights as full-time workers and their equivalents. That must be made clear in the debate. Many parts of our society rely on the part-time workforce because of the excellent service that it provides. One need only look at public sector workers such as police officers, nurses, and soldiers in the Royal Irish Regiment, many of whom serve in a part-time capacity. Those people play a crucial part in servicing our society. The motion refers to the rights of all part-time workers, which I assume includes police officers, members of the Royal Irish Regiment, nursing staff and others.

It is important to remember that part-time workers should not be given more rights than their full-time counterparts. It is unfortunate that the wording of the motion creates that level of inequality. Studies of the subject indicate that part-time workers must have a right to a pension scheme with employer contributions. I assume that the Member composed his speech in Irish and it lost something in translation. The translated version of his speech missed a crucial point — employer contributions are voluntary. The motion would, therefore, make it compulsory for employers to give part-time workers something that they are not obliged to give to full-time workers. On that basis, we must recognise

that, as the motion would create that inequality, it cannot and should not get the support of the House.

I hope that a motion can be tabled at a later date that will resolve this problem caused by careless wording, and that it will promote the idea that part-time workers should receive the same rights — not more rights or special rights — as their full-time equivalents. The amendment that I tabled with the Speaker's Office would have made that simple change. Given other Members' remarks, I think that that amendment would have been approved. I am disappointed with the Speaker's Office, but that is another matter.

The motion would not achieve what John Kelly said that it would achieve. He said that the motion speaks for itself, but I have shown that that is not the case. The motion differs from the Member's argument, which is unfortunate.

The motion would place a burden on all employers to provide a contributory pension scheme. That would make employers think twice before they made any jobs available, whether those jobs were for full-time workers or part-time workers. People should consider that carefully. It is worth stating that there is no requirement on employers to run such a pension scheme. However, where a scheme exists, it should be open to all employees, whether they are full-time or part-time. According to European law, that can be contested by employees who think that they are being discriminated against. A good employer will provide a voluntary pension scheme. However, it is wrong for the motion to be approved because it supposes that such a scheme is compulsory, when that is not the case.

It is unfortunate that we cannot amend the motion, because that would allow the House to give full-time workers and their equivalents the support that they deserve. I hope that we will be able to rectify that at a later stage. On that basis, my party opposes the motion.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Our amendment was submitted to correct a motion that was clearly not in order. The amendment should be reconsidered. It is the duty of the Speaker's Office to ensure that every motion that is tabled falls within the parameters of the law of the House. This motion does not do that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As I said earlier, the matter is the Speaker's decision, and the Speaker does not have to give a reason for accepting or rejecting an amendment.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am not asking the Speaker to give a reason. The motion is not in order. The House pays people to ensure that only motions that are in order are tabled. Those people have a duty to do that. The matter should be referred back to the Speaker's Office. I am not commenting on the Speaker. He may

be sleeping, eating or drinking — I hope that he is drinking water. My argument is simply that the motion is not in order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Paisley, the Speaker has ruled that the motion is in order.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thought that Dr Paisley was about to suggest that the Speaker might have been participating in line dancing. We know how he likes to huff and puff about such things.

The debate is timely. Recently, not a week has gone by without the media covering a story about pension schemes that are in dire straits. Landmark judgements have been made by the European Court of Justice that suggest that part-time workers who have been excluded from company pension schemes may have been discriminated against. That matter should concern us all.

We have heard about grand plans for pension simplification, and we should make every effort to ensure that pensions are not eradicated.

Many people feel that the state will look after them in their old age, but I am not convinced that that is so. Full-time workers often feel that state pension provision is not adequate. Given that the majority of part-time workers are women, sex discrimination is often used as a basis for pursuing claims, and the needs of the rural community must also be addressed as part-time work is necessary to augment agricultural incomes.

4.15 pm

However, the issue for part-time workers is one of simple economics. If a scheme is available, part-time workers often find that the price that they have to pay for the administration of the scheme, and their contribution to it, is far too expensive, given the wages that they earn.

I congratulate my Colleague John Kelly for bringing this motion to the House. He has succeeded in highlighting concerns shared by people from all constituencies and all political backgrounds. I sympathise with the thrust of the motion, and I call on the Minister for Social Development to have the matter investigated. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Shannon: As has been said, the DUP wishes to see equal rights for all — not just for those in part-time work but for those in full-time work. The proposal fails to meet that demand for equal rights. For many years, my Colleagues and party members have lobbied for the right of part-time and full-time workers to a pension scheme with employer contributions, so I am surprised that Mr John Kelly and Sinn Féin are so concerned about people who work for their money, such as those in the part-time Royal Irish Regiment and the part-time Royal Ulster Constabulary.

Not so long ago, we debated the issue of RUC part-time officers' receiving pensions after their massive contribution to, and sacrifice for, the safety of the Province over 30 years. As I said then, the IRA never differentiated between full-time and part-time police and soldiers when setting those men and women up as targets for its bombs and bullets. In fact, one third of all the RUC officers killed in the troubles were part-time constables, and a great many more part-time constables were maimed and injured by terrorist attacks. The Royal Ulster Constabulary's and the Royal Irish Regiment's part-time personnel were denied their rights, and it is a violation of their basic human rights to treat them differently from the rest of the population, especially when they were engaged —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. You are straying from the subject of the motion.

Mr Shannon: I do not believe that I am. I am referring to their rights as part-time and full-time workers. They were denied their rights, and to treat them differently from the rest of the population also violates their basic human rights, especially given that they were engaged in the most dangerous job in the Province. We have all seen what has happened as a result of that, with the crime waves and other problems in the Province. However, those men and women have worked particularly long and unusual hours, and they deserve a pension on that account alone. They put their lives on the line for us every day. Are Members aware that full-time members of the Police Service do not —

Mr Deputy Speaker: This is not a debate on the RUC Reserve. Will the Member please stick to the motion.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Given that the Member who moved the motion spoke completely contrary to what it claimed, surely my Colleague is entitled to some latitude when making his argument.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, Mr Paisley. The problem is the degree of latitude that Mr Shannon is expecting from the Chair. Mr Shannon, I ask you please to stick to the motion.

Mr Shannon: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am quite happy to. I simply want to make Members aware of part-time and full-time rights and of the fact that members of the new Police Service do not receive pension rights until they have worked for nine years. Is that right? We must address part-time and full-time pension rights. That is my party's goal, and that is why we cannot support the motion at this time. We are all aware of the contribution of part-time workers, not just within the police and the UDR — or the Royal Irish Regiment, as it is now known — but in hospitals and other places.

It is not realised that many who work part-time, and even some full-time workers, have only a state pension

on which to fall back. The rights of everyone should be incorporated and protected.

Many receive a state pension of around £70 a week. My constituents and many others inform me that that barely covers fuel bills, let alone food, clothing, and so on. Those who built the country and held society together are being left in their old age to adapt to poverty, and, in some cases, destitution. Some are more deserving of a pension than most, yet it is for an employer to decide whether to provide an employer-contributed pension, and sometimes they object on the grounds that their profits would be cut.

The lack of money available to those who have spent their lives in employment means that many who are in their seventies continue to work, because they have been unable to earn enough money to survive during old age. Pensioners are working when they should be taking it easy, fulfilling ambitions and enjoying hobbies. The motion does not address the fact that pensioners have worked hard for a lifetime. Many full-time employees do not have pension rights. It was announced today that the future is no brighter for our children. The speculation is that our children will be working well into their seventies, as their pension rights might not be protected, even if they are in full-time employment.

Legislation that entitles part-time workers to an employer-contributed pension should apply to full-time employees also. Many in this country cannot save money until they are in their forties, and sometimes they have no time to make any savings. If employers made contributions for all workers, we could eradicate pensioner poverty, move towards a fully sustainable society and eradicate problems such as hospital wards full of pensioners suffering from malnutrition and hypothermia.

We need full, not piecemeal, legislation that will safeguard the future of all workers — all workers deserve pensions and pension rights. It is a crying shame that the Government do not reward those who have worked the hardest and the longest, and those who have carried out the most dangerous jobs in this country, with legislation that will protect their lifestyle well into their latter years.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. Just as we do not want a society that promotes a low-wage economy, with few or no rights for workers, we do not want one that does not value people when their working years are over. Society has a responsibility to ensure that workers receive adequate provision during their employment and when they retire. In addition, employers have a responsibility to ensure that full-time and part-time staff receive their full entitlement. Ultimately, employers profit from their workers, so it is only right that employees should receive adequate provision.

Contrary to the belief of some who spoke earlier, who seem to have misread and misunderstood the motion, the proposal is based on the belief that part-time workers are not treated equally — it is an equality issue. It is imperative that we establish a minimum standard of fairness for part-time workers, so that they will not receive less favourable treatment than their full-time colleagues. Women, in particular those from low-income backgrounds, fall into that category — they are disadvantaged from the outset. It is important that we implement the European Directive as quickly as possible and introduce progressive legislation on the matter.

Society encourages flexible working, and there is a range of working patterns that meets the needs of employers and the desire of employees for greater freedom of choice in organising their working lives. During the past 10 years the fastest growth has been in employment that is not based on a standard 35-hour, 37-hour or 40-hour week. Since 1989, the percentage of part-time jobs as a proportion of all jobs has risen from 24% to 29%. We must recognise that different work patterns exist and that there is no justification for treating employees differently simply because of the number of hours worked. We must move as quickly as possible towards progressive, rights-based legislation that provides for that and for the right of part-time workers to make pension contributions. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Gibson: The motion is wrong — in fact, it is contrary to EU Directives.

I support the idea that part-time workers deserve the same opportunities as full-time workers. However, I wish to mention an area of employment that has not been mentioned, but which is the fastest growing area of employment arrangements, especially in the west of the Province — the contractual arrangement.

Nowadays many firms do not employ as large a workforce as in the past. Most of the work is contracted out; therefore we find that families — and extended families — organise themselves into groups. Often that is done under the heading of farm diversification. Those people make contractual arrangements with a parent firm to make items of equipment to a standard specification.

It is a growing area. In the west of the Province, many lorry drivers are driving under a contractual arrangement. Many of the large contracting firms are now subcontracting work to people who at one time may have been part of their workforce.

That has created a new area of employment. Some of the work is part-time by nature or perhaps because of the size of a farm or the size of a group. A group will decide how many items it can produce within a certain period. I shall give an example. One of the local firms in my area contracts out the making of parts for washing machines. Group members may choose to produce

three parts per week; they can do the work in their own time, and during the hours that suit them. However, it is a contractual arrangement.

I know of other firms that have always operated pension schemes. They have made part-time or full-time work opportunities available to every employee. Some firms have been famously successful in that. I know of one case in which the actuary had to warn all those who were contracted to the firm that contributions had to be reduced because the outcomes were going to exceed the legally allowed amounts in pension schemes.

The motion does not take account of the fastest growing area of employment arrangements because of the change that has occurred during the past 10 to 15 years. People have decided to accept more personal responsibility and more accountability for their own financial arrangements and have opted to go into a contractual agreement with others.

4.30 pm

Therefore, many could be classified as part-time workers, but allied with other activities of that household. Unfortunately, the motion fails to take account of the largest group in my constituency — those who are moving into self-contracting arrangements.

I support the proposal mentioned by Mr Paisley Jnr and Jim Shannon. There have been situations in which pension arrangements for part-time workers have been prevented; for example, for those in the Royal Irish Regiment and the UDR.

When I said that I supported the idea that part-time workers should have the same opportunities as full-time workers, it is important that we remember that that change is taking place. What was once known as the popular system of employment in west of the Province is rapidly changing as people take on personal responsibilities and move into their own contractual arrangements, whether that be driving a lorry or manufacturing items. Sometimes a group — up to eight people — would enter into a contractual arrangement. They would go into production either in the farmyards or on the manufacturer's premises.

Those arrangements have not been recognised and are not being discussed. The Fair Employment Commission seemed to have no interest in that area when the Committee met with it. The area is expanding and is now becoming so large that the Assembly will have to recognise this new employment arrangement. It is almost a halfway house between the self-employed person and the person who is in full-time direct employment. It is good that the Assembly should encourage the old Ulster adage of self-help, self-improvement and being responsible for one's own finances. Encouraging those opportunities should be part of the debate.

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds):

I have listened carefully to the various contributions made in this short debate. Some points were relevant to the motion; many were not. Interestingly, proponents of the motion seemed to spend little time on the motion and veered to wider issues, whereas those opposing it actually dealt with the issues. That may reflect that fact that — as several Members pointed out — the motion as drafted does not make much sense.

I shall spell out the position clearly. If an employer provides an occupational pension scheme for his full-time employees, part-time employees doing comparable work must be granted access to the scheme. That is the position. The mover of the motion either failed to understand that position or else his comments simply did not acknowledge it. The only exception can be if the employer can objectively justify the exclusion of part-time workers. If a part-time employee feels that he has been excluded from an occupational pension scheme unfairly, he can seek redress via an industrial tribunal in accordance with the legislation laid down — the Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000.

Let us be clear about the motion. Like other Members, I was perplexed when I read it. Several Members, including Dr Birnie in his capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, Mr Paisley Jnr and Mr Shannon, have pointed out that, as drafted, the motion calls for all part-time workers to have access to a pension scheme with employer contributions. That would put part-time employees in a more advantageous position than full-time employees. Where is the equality in that?

I listened to the people behind this motion talking about equality, but as Members have pointed out, there is no requirement on employers to offer full-time employees a pension scheme with employer contributions. If the motion were to be implemented as drafted, it could have serious consequences. For example, it would effectively undermine the whole voluntary nature of occupational pension provision. The increased costs to employers would be a real disincentive to employ part-time workers.

The mover of the motion cannot have given much thought to the way in which it was drafted. Perhaps I am being too generous, but he could not possibly have intended the outcomes that would flow from an implementation of the motion. Perhaps I am being too generous; perhaps inequality is what we want in this area. That is a matter that the mover of the motion, and those who supported him, did not go into in any detail.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Social Development Committee asked for the Minister to investigate the matter. We have investigated it. If she and some of her Colleagues had done the slightest bit of investigation

or homework on this issue, they would not have drafted the motion as they did.

Pensions are important to us all. One of our main aims is to ensure that everyone can look forward to a decent income in retirement. The importance of pensions has been vividly illustrated in recent weeks. Members will have seen a great deal of coverage on the subject of pensions in many of the broadsheets and other publications. Occupational pension schemes, whether defined-benefit or defined-contribution, remain a very good option for securing a decent income in retirement.

However, I stress that occupational pension schemes are provided voluntarily. There is no requirement on an employer to provide such a scheme for his employees, be they part-time or full-time. Where an employer has five or more employees, whether full-time or part-time, and he does not have an occupational pension scheme or make prescribed contributions to a personal pension scheme available to his employees, the employer must offer the relevant employees access to a stakeholder pension scheme. There is no requirement that the employer make contributions to the stakeholder scheme. However, the employer must offer access to a designated scheme that his employees can join if they wish.

The existing provision places a statutory obligation on employers who offer a pension scheme to full-time employees to offer access to comparable part-time employees, unless employers can objectively justify their exclusion. That approach is right. There will be agreement in the House on that issue. There is a delicate balancing act between protecting the rights of employees on the one hand and ensuring that we minimise the disincentives to employers offering pension schemes on the other. The existing statutory provision for equal access rights is designed to safeguard part-time employees from unscrupulous employers.

It offers them the right of redress if they think that they have been unfairly excluded from their employer's pension scheme. It is entirely proper that part-time employees are protected in that way. That is currently on the statute book. It is why most of us who know anything about the issue and have done our homework on it are perplexed at the motion as drafted.

I will pick up on some points that were made during the debate. Dr Birnie mentioned fixed-term workers. I understand that the Department for Employment and Learning is currently reviewing the position of fixed-term workers. One Member spoke about low-paid workers and women workers. The state second pension is designed to offer pension provision to low-paid workers.

Mr Dallat referred to the problems faced by small businesses. A United Kingdom-wide review, led by an independent pensions expert, is examining the simplification of pension law to help to make it easier for employers to run such schemes. Stakeholder pensions

offer access to a private pension where the employer does not run such a scheme. Mr Dallat also raised the issue of tax credits. He will know that that is not a matter for the devolved Administration. It is a matter for the Inland Revenue.

Mr Shannon, the Member for Strangford, spoke about the inadequacy of state pensions. However, as Members will be aware, the minimum income guarantee ensures that nobody is solely dependent on a state pension. The pension credit, which will replace the minimum income guarantee from 2003, will be even more generous, and that is as it should be.

Other issues were raised during the debate that had little to do with the motion. The mover and others made sweeping statements about pensions. To say that part-time employees have practically no pension rights is simply untrue, as I and other Members have illustrated. To say that people who have paid taxes and National Insurance contributions are consigned to the rubbish heap when they retire is also untrue. It must be the aim of Government to encourage people to make provision for retirement during their working life. That is why the state second pension was introduced, and that is why we are running the series of press and television advertisements that have been referred to in order that people can make an informed choice. That is why the pension credit is being introduced. The idea that people are not committed to the matter is simply untrue.

The motion as drafted does not accord with the basic legal position. It would put part-time workers in a more advantageous position than full-time workers, and it seems to ignore completely the current statutory provision that guarantees that, where an occupational pension scheme is available, it must also be made available to part-time employees, unless the employer can show good objective reasons why that should not be. If the employer tries to do that, the part-time employee can take legal action.

Therefore, I have no hesitation in recommending that the House reject this ill-informed, badly drafted motion. Those who spoke with a genuine interest in the plight of people approaching retirement will note the utter hypocrisy of Sinn Féin Members in particular. They talk about the need to protect people in their old age, despite the fact that many people are in their graves today as a result of actions carried out by them and their colleagues. Those who died were not allowed to enjoy the fruits of their retirement, with their family or anyone else.

4.45 pm

Sinn Féin Members talk about social welfare, pensioners and other issues as if their party has helped people in those situations during the past 30 years. The money that was wasted during its campaign of

terror could have contributed towards pensions, health, education and all the rest.

Mr J Kelly: The last comments from the Minister effectively sum up the negative attitude — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr J Kelly: — displayed by the DUP today. They further highlight the DUP's hypocritical approach to social issues. It is good at mocking, and talking about years of violence, while it washes its hands of its participation in violence over the past 30 years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to restrict their comments to the motion.

Mr J Kelly: I notice that you did not ask the previous Member who spoke to stick to comments on the motion.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Your ruling is now being challenged. Are you prepared to deal with this Member as you dealt with Mr McCartney?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will make that decision.

Mr J Kelly: It is disappointing to listen to the DUP. The motion was an attempt to address a prevailing issue. Perhaps the DUP's objection to the motion is based on the fact that of the six million part-time workers throughout England, Scotland and Wales, 4·8 million are women. The DUP's view of women seems to be similar to that of the Taliban. However, I will not labour the point.

I take on board Esmond Birnie's point that there are anomalies that must be addressed — I have no problem with that. If the DUP wishes to propose a motion, I have no problem with that either. The Minister said that part-time workers ought to have the same rights as full-time workers, but that that depended on an objective analysis. He said that if workers felt that

they were being treated unfairly they could go to court. That people should be subjected to such stress in order to get what they are entitled to does not seem — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is entitled to be heard.

Mr J Kelly: — to be an objective approach. The European Court of Justice in Luxembourg had to decide in May 2000 whether the pensions of part-time workers should be backdated to 1976. It is interesting that the case was brought to the European Court by women who had no other recourse and no other means of addressing the injustices of their position as part-time workers. They had to bring the case to court not as part-time workers who had been denied their pension rights, but on the basis that, under European law, the occupational pension scheme had sexually discriminated against them.

I am attempting — indeed, we are attempting — to remove those anomalies from the existing hardships that part-time workers face.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr J Kelly: Therefore despite the huffing and puffing, the muttering and gibbering of those who have created mayhem in their own communities in the past 30 years, I ask the House to support the motion.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It would have been nice if we had been informed that it was a Royal Ulster Constabulary policewoman who did that great job in Europe.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Paisley, I do not think that that is a point of order. *[Interruption]*. Order.

Question put and negatived.

Adjourned at 4.51 pm.

Committee Stage Records

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 23 January 2002

**PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES
(AMENDMENT) BILL
(NIA 1/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Armitage
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mrs Courtney
Mr J Kelly
Mr McFarland
Ms McWilliams
Ms Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Peter Deazley)
Mr Robin MacRory) Department of Health, Social
Miss Claire Thompson) Services and Public Safety

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr Deazley, Mr MacRory and Miss Thompson from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Committee has a briefing paper identifying the remaining parts of the Bill that must be considered. The Department's response to queries raised at our previous meeting is now with Committee members.

Clause 10 (Short title)

The Chairperson: The first item of business is the short title. Members queried the wording of the short title and asked officials why it should not refer to the specific purpose of the Bill. The Department has responded that it consulted with the Office of the Legislative Counsel, which advised that amending the short title would defeat the objective of having a brief but accurate description. The Bill deals with several issues, all of which would need to be included in the title. Would the officials comment on that?

Mr MacRory: Have members seen all of the advice from the Office of the Legislative Counsel?

The Committee Clerk: Yes, it has been tabled.

Ms McWilliams: We have only just received it.

The Chairperson: I will give members some time to examine it. If members are happy with the paper, we will move on.

Mr MacRory: I cannot add much to the paper, which is the advice of our senior counsel George Gray, the head of the parliamentary draftsmen. He has quoted chapter and verse, with appropriate legal references. From the Department's point of view, I must take his advice on the matter. He is the authority on the subject.

Ms Armitage: Does that mean that the Committee must also take his advice?

The Chairperson: His advice has been offered to the Committee.

Ms Armitage: I am not opposed to taking his advice. However, he has quoted from Northern Ireland statutes in 1972. That was 30 years ago. It is wrong that nothing can ever be changed. I do not see the problem with changing things.

Mr MacRory: One of George Gray's main points is that there are two titles, one of which describes the contents of the Bill in full. Anyone who is looking for a full and accurate description of a Bill should look to the long title rather than the short title. However, that does not mean that, where possible, a short title should not also be descriptive.

Ms Armitage: The reason for the long title is to make it more self-explanatory for the public.

Mr McFarland: A Bill entitled "Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill" means nothing. No one would have a single clue as to what the Bill is about. When I raised the point last week, I tried to explain why it might be a good idea to have a short title that indicated what the Bill contained. That seemed to be an eminently logical thing. It is not unreasonable to ask for such a title.

My sense is that you have gone to the legal eagles and asked them to find reasons why the Bill should not be changed. Let me give you an example: last week I suggested that we should call this Bill "Carers" — and please note that this is one word and that "Disabled Children" brings the total to three. We then mentioned "Direct Payments" — two more words. We could also have included the word "and", although that may not be a legal word. Therefore we perhaps had five or six words — and the word "Bill" brought the total to seven. That would tell people what the Bill is about. You have told the legal eagles that the Committee's suggestion would put nine words before the word "Act", and on the basis of that information they have said that there has not been anything since 1972 defining a short title of this length.

That is probably correct — but we do not have nine words. Who briefed the legal eagles that this was to be a nine-word title? As I said to you last week, this is a

new game. If you keep returning to how things have operated for the past 30 years because it is convenient, you will continue having rows.

I understand the meaning of “long title”. That can be 50 pages long so as to explain to the legal eagles, who wish to delve into a Bill, exactly what it is about. My not unreasonable view is that the short title of a Bill should tell people quickly — at the top of the page — what the Bill is about. I get a real sense that you have asked them to find reasons why we should be quiet and agree with what they have proposed.

Mr MacRory: I do not like the implication that I have, in some way, led, or misled, counsel in this matter.

The Chairperson: I accept that. However, Alan McFarland is explaining the Committee’s frustration with this matter, which we discussed last week. The system has been around for many years. His proposal was reasonable and I had hoped that the experts to whom you were speaking would provide something along the lines that Mr McFarland had suggested. Although the Committee did not vote on the proposal, there was support for it.

Mr MacRory: The draftsman is part of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. He provides us with advice and has always provided the title for a Bill. I suggest that the Committee ask George Gray to come and defend his position. It is not my decision.

The Chairperson: I understand that perfectly.

Mr McFarland: Was Mr Gray briefed that the suggested short title was nine words long?

Mr MacRory: I told counsel that the suggested title was “the personal social services (carers, disabled children and direct payments) Bill”.

Mr McFarland: No, it was not. It was never that.

Mr MacRory: That is what it sounded like.

Mr McFarland: The record will show what the Committee were suggesting. I tend to labour these things ad nauseum — and the Committee will understand what I mean by that — so that everyone understands what we are trying to produce. I am concerned that on the basis of the brief that the title would be nine words long, the draftsman decided that the title was too long. However, our suggested short title is not nine words long.

The Chairperson: Ms McWilliams, would you like to ask a question?

Ms McWilliams: Thank you, but my question has been answered.

Mr Berry: Is it possible for Mr Gray to appear before the Committee?

The Chairperson: There is the time factor involved.

Mr Berry: This matter could then be dealt with. The problem regarding the title has been discussed over the past couple of weeks. In fairness to both people, while Mr McFarland is frustrated about the issue, Mr MacRory is obviously doing all that he can to ensure that something is done. Can Mr Gray come to the Committee so that we can sort out the matter and not be discussing it every week?

The Chairperson: The Committee has the authority to propose an amendment to the Bill. If the Committee is unhappy with the short title as it stands, we can agree that the long title be amended to read, “Personal Social Services (Carers, Disabled Children, Direct Payments) Bill”.

Mr McFarland: The long title, Mr Chairperson?

The Committee Clerk: No. Members are content with the long title. If members wish to amend the short title it would be in the form that the Chairperson has just read.

Mr McFarland: Someone has added the words “personal social services” to our suggested title. Let me go through this again. In Great Britain a Bill called the “Carers and Disabled Children Bill” went through Parliament. The title stated exactly what that Bill was about.

Here, for reasons that may make sense somewhere, we have decided to add legislation about direct payments and other matters not directly concerned with carers and disabled children. On that basis, we are not allowed to call it the carers, disabled children and direct payment Bill. We must call it the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill.

We have two options. We can call it the carers, disabled children and direct payment Bill, or we can take the words “direct payments” out of the title and have a carers and disabled children Bill — like GB — plus a direct payment Bill. That would avoid having a nebulous title to cover a mishmash of legislation.

The Chairperson: It is not that I want to move away from Mr McFarland’s point, but we are talking about the short title. If the Committee is content with the long title as it stands, I will put the question.

Mr McFarland: I have no personal concern about this. However, if the legislation is to be correct, it ought to be comprehensible. I will not speak of this matter again if the Committee feels that I am labouring the point. I have no vested interest in the matter, but no one else is speaking up.

Ms Armitage: We would have supported you, Mr McFarland, but no one could get a word in edgeways. I support you.

Mr MacRory: Perhaps we are not the correct people to be giving evidence on this matter. The Department did not decide on the title for the Bill. We

have taken the best legal advice that we can get, and we must follow it. The Committee must talk to George Gray if it wants a fuller explanation. The issue about not including the words “personal social services” in the title of the Bill is partly explained in the penultimate paragraph of Mr Gray’s note dated 17 January. Health and Personal Social Service is a field of legislation in Northern Ireland, therefore, we must use the words “Health” or “Personal Social Services”. Mr Gray may be able to change that, but I cannot.

Ms Armitage: I propose we meet Mr Gray.

Mr J Kelly: The following paragraph from Mr Gray’s note is significant, and needs clarification:

“It would be potentially misleading because if any of the three elements in the Act were repealed in the future, the Act would for the rest of its life have a title which referred to a matter with which it did not deal. So if, for example, a future HPSS Bill contained new provisions about direct payments (or simply consolidated the existing provisions) clauses 6 and 7 of this Bill would be repealed; but the Act would continue for all time to have a short title which referred to a matter which was no longer covered by the Act.”

We need clarification on this matter.

Ms Armitage: I propose we meet Mr Gray. Would you second that proposal?

Ms McWilliams: When we were considering this point at our first meeting, I simply asked the question. As we moved further into the debate, we all became quite wedded to the suggestion. The reason was that we wanted devolved legislation in Northern Ireland to do what is described in Mr Gray’s note — to identify, to describe, and to facilitate people’s understanding of what the legislation is all about.

The Committee has only just received Mr Gray’s note, Mr Chairperson. Mr McCrory says that he is not best placed to take us through the legislative technicalities. It would be useful to spend time on this matter now because of future legislation. Members who were in the Chamber on Monday 21 January would have heard the Minister refer to future legislation being described as personal social services (No 1) Bill. Then will come (No 2) Bill, (No 3) Bill et cetera. It struck me then that the debate we started here might continue. It may be important to have the draftsman before the Committee so that we can ask questions. Is it just the case that legacy has not permitted more than nine words in the short title? Conversely, is it for the reasons that John Kelly has just indicated — that if parts of the Act were to be changed then the name of the Act would no longer be relevant?

I suggest that we take time to read the note. I am always unhappy to receive lengthy legal papers just as the Committee is meeting. Perhaps we could return to this matter next week.

The Chairperson: I have an e-mail from Mr George Gray, which reads

“I would prefer not to appear before the Committee at this stage. The draftsmen have not given evidence to date before any Committees”.

Mr MacRory: I suggested that he might come, Mr Chairperson. I knew that I would be in trouble on those points.

The Chairperson: The e-mail continues

“I would prefer not to set a precedent. If Committees called for us every time a drafting point arose, we could spend a lot of time on that.”

Mr McFarland: Oh goody.

The Chairperson: I have prepared a fuller note on the point although it all boils down to the simple fact that a short title must be short.

Ms McWilliams, are you proposing that we come back to this?

Ms McWilliams: Yes.

Ms Armitage: Mr Chairperson, you already had a proposal. I proposed that we meet Mr Gray.

Ms Ramsey: I second that proposal.

Ms Armitage: I presume that Ms McWilliams is proposing an amendment to my proposal.

Ms McWilliams: It is not. It is the same proposal.

Ms Armitage: Is it?

Ms McWilliams: Yes.

Ms Armitage: Why did you propose it if I had already done so?

Ms McWilliams: I was saying that we could refer to this matter next week.

The Chairperson: The proposal is being made by Ms McWilliams and seconded by Ms Armitage. Is that agreed?

Ms Armitage: Will you read the proposal, Mr Chairperson?

The Chairperson: The proposal is that we return to this matter next week.

Ms Armitage: When will the Committee be meeting Mr Gray?

The Chairperson: We are asking Mr Gray to come to the Committee next week. Can we fit that in at next week’s meeting? We will be going to Craigavon Area Hospital that morning.

Mr J Kelly: Ms Armitage’s proposal to meet Mr Gray was the first proposal. That is what we ought to be doing. The Committee is confused about the content of his note. There is no point in coming back next week to go through the whole thing again without Mr Gray being here.

The Chairperson: We should leave the other outstanding matters relating to the Bill for the moment. Ms Armitage has made a proposal. Is there a seconder?

Ms Ramsey: Yes.

The Chairperson: Is that agreed?

Ms McWilliams: Yes. My proposal was also adding that we leave the Bill now, and return to it having had time to read the paper that has been prepared for us. We can then ask questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much everyone.

NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Wednesday 30 January 2002

PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES
(AMENDMENT) BILL
(NIA 1/01)

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Armitage
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mr J Kelly
Ms McWilliams
Ms Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr P Simpson) Department of Health,
Mr P Deazley) Social Services and
Miss C Thompson) Public Safety

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr Paul Simpson, Mr Peter Deazley and Miss Clare Thompson from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Clause 10 (Short title)

The Chairperson: Members have questioned the short title of the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill and have asked why it should not refer to the contents of the Bill. Members asked whether the legislative draftsmen could be invited to speak to the Committee on the title of the Bill. Following advice, the Committee agreed that its questions should be directed to the Department.

The Department has responded and advised that the short title was chosen because the Bill deals with a number of issues. If all of those were included in the short title to ensure that it was accurate, that would defeat the purpose of the short title. Officials have indicated that, where possible, the Department tries to provide suitable descriptive titles for Bills. The matter has been considered at length over the past two weeks, and Members can now ask questions.

The Committee Clerk: As the Chairperson says, we should direct our questions to the Department. It has provided advice, based on the legislative draft, on the reason for the title as it stands. I know that the Committee has some concerns, and one Member has raised several issues in past weeks. The Committee can table an amendment to the Bill, if it feels that that is necessary.

Ms Ramsey: We discussed this matter several weeks ago and went around the houses on it. I am aware that the Committee cannot call for the person who drafted the Bill to appear before it, as that would be unprecedented. However, I do not accept that. The Committee can set its own agenda, and that would speed the process up, rather than going back and forward with Committee officials, possibly for several more weeks. I propose — and I know that Mr McFarland also feels passionately about this — that the Committee table an amendment to get around that when the Bill reaches Consideration Stage.

Amendment proposed: in page 10, line 2, leave out

“Personal Social Services (Amendment) Act”

and insert

“Carers, Disabled Children and Direct Payments Act” — [*Ms Ramsey*]

Proposed amendment agreed to.

Clause 10, as amended, agreed to,

Long title agreed to

Clause 2 (Service for carers)

The Chairperson: On 16 January, Members agreed that they were content with subsections 1 to 9. Subsection 10 says that decisions are to be made “without regard to the means of the carer”. There were concerns about the definition of the word “means” and whether it referred solely to financial means. The Department’s response, which has been tabled for Members’ attention, states that reference to “means” in the Bill refers to direct payments only — references also occur at clause 6(3) and clause 7(3).

Mr Deazley: The paper that I sent to the Committee simply points out that “means” in this context refers to charging for non-residential personal social services as opposed to charging for residential care. In that case, there is no question of assets or property being taken into account; it is only income, and the same regulations apply as for income support.

Ms McWilliams: I am satisfied with that.

Ms Ramsey: The Department’s response states that income includes salaries, wages and some social security benefits, but it does not include attendance allowance or disability.

Mr Deazley: I would need to find out exactly which social security benefits are taken into account.

Ms Ramsey: I am probably nit-picking.

The Chairperson: Never.

Ms McWilliams: I asked what means were considered, and I was concerned about assets being taken into account. As far as I understand it, this is the standard means

test, and you have outlined the non-means-tested and means-tested benefits. That is in keeping with everything else.

The Chairperson: Ms Ramsey, would you be happy with a letter on that matter?

Ms Ramsey: Yes.

Clause 2 agreed to.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 13 February 2002

**PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES
(AMENDMENT) BILL
(NIA 1/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mr McFarland
Ms McWilliams
Ms Ramsey

Witnesses:

Ms H Ferguson	) Carers Northern Ireland
Ms T Caul	) Children's Law Centre
Ms M Kelly	) Barnardo's
Mr Peter Deazley	) Department of Health,
Ms M Sisk	) Social Services and
Mr J Clarke	) Public Safety

The Chairperson: I welcome Ms Helen Ferguson from Carers Northern Ireland, Ms Tara Caul from the Children's Law Centre and Ms Margaret Kelly of Barnardo's. I am also pleased that Mr Peter Deazley, Ms Margaret Sisk and Mr John Clarke of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are with us. Item 8 on our agenda is the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill. At annex 5 there is a note of proposed amendments placed before the Committee by Barnardo's and Carers Northern Ireland, assisted by the Children's Law Centre. The Committee received those late last Wednesday and agreed to hear from both the organisations concerned and the Department regarding the proposals. We shall hear first from Barnardo's, Carers Northern Ireland and the Children's Law Centre, who have put forward two proposals for amendments.

Ms Ferguson: We drafted the first amendment to ensure that there was a duty on social services to offer a separate assessment to carers who provide regular and substantial care. It deals with adult carers who look after another person because of frailty, disability or old age. We put forward the amendment for the reasons discussed

when our initial evidence was presented to the Committee. At the moment carers, under departmental guidance, have the right to a separate assessment. Most, however, are not assessed, since they are not aware of their right to ask for an assessment. The implication is that they are not being informed of that right by social services.

I am sure that the departmental officials will say that the intention is to ensure that as many carers as possible have assessments. The Regulations will be crafted in such a way as to ensure that social services are encouraged to offer assessments to carers or to inform carers of their right. My fear is that the existing guidance on carers' assessments is very good. It sets out the way in which the Department thinks that carers should be treated by social services, and it contains a provision which says that social services should inform carers of their right to a carer's assessment. The duty to inform is already there in the guidance. However, that is not being acted on. The only way to ensure that all carers will have access to a carer's assessment is to put the onus on social services to offer one. It is then up to the carer whether he or she chooses to proceed.

Many carers will not want a separate assessment, since it is not necessary for them. At the moment, however, not all of them know of their right to one.

Ms M Kelly: The first amendment deals with those under 16 years of age. Several children in Northern Ireland provide care, and the average age of a young carer here is fourteen and a half. As it stands the Bill does not apply at all to those under 16 years of age. The argument is that those under 16 years of age should not be in that caring role and that it is therefore best if they are not in the legislation. While we accept that those under 16 years of age should not be in that role, the fact is that they are.

Exclusion from this legislation will give rise to a situation where those under 16 are in a caring role without anyone having a statutory responsibility to examine their needs or their getting any services. In Barnardo's we have evidence of child carers who have not been able to go to school and therefore have no educational qualifications. That has huge ramifications, for there is no duty under any legislation for the needs of those children to be taken on board.

The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 is vague. It does not define children in need exactly, and that has been one of our problems. Young carers are children in need, but it can be difficult to get social services to provide services to those children, since they have a whole list of groupings. Something, whether in this legislation or in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, must state that, where a child has taken on substantial caring responsibilities for an adult within the home, social services have a duty to assess

and provide services that enable him or her to develop in the normal way of children.

The other group is 16- to 18-year-olds. They are covered by the legislation, which applies to any carer over 16 years of age. Our concern is that 16- to 18-year-olds are treated just like adult carers, though they are still legally children. Their needs must be examined and assessed in the context of their being children. They cannot be assessed as adults, who have different needs.

We also suggested an assessment under article 18 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Two assessments may not be required, but they could be carried out jointly under this legislation and the Order. Note of their age — be it 16, 17 or 18 — would be taken, and the services given would recognise that.

Part of our problem has been that legislation in England and Wales did not recognise children. Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families', applicable across all social, health and education services, recognised those children and accorded them a status. We do not have that 'framework in Northern Ireland. Our boards and trusts have developed different frameworks, and there is nothing to say that every board and trust will examine the needs of young carers. If young carers are to be protected and helped, they must be included in the legislation before us or under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 so that they have a right to be assessed and to avail of services.

Mr Gallagher: I am not clear about the 16- to 18-year-old age group and the assessment. Should the right to be assessed be included in both the Bill and the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 or only in the former?

Ms Caul: There would be concurrent assessment. Under current legislation, 16- to 18-year-olds are entitled to an assessment. There should also be a right to a concurrent assessment under the children-in-need provisions of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. That is reflected in the guidance for England and is good practice.

Mr Gallagher: While I do not object, I do not understand why the matter must be covered by both.

Ms M Kelly: The assessment would be slightly different under the two pieces of legislation. I hope that, in practice, assessment of someone aged 16 or 17 would also examine the carer as a child in need. The extra considerations of being a child would be taken into account. For example, if the child wished to continue in education, that would be firmly taken into account.

Ms Ferguson: Assessment of carers concerns the ability of the carer to continue with the task. An assessment of a young person may well say that he or she should not be encouraged or enabled to carry on caring but facilitated to stop.

Ms Ramsey: One reason that most Committees send material to groups is that, while we might be aware of many things, groups such as yours, working at a community level, can raise issues. Ms Kelly said that those under 16 years of age are not recognised in the Bill. The average age of a young carer is fourteen and a half. Since there should be no carers of that age, would recognising them in the Bill present legal problems for the Department?

Another issue is Mr Gallagher's point that we are treating 16- to 18-year-olds as adults when they are still children, since a 16-year-old carer goes to school and is not entitled to claim benefits. Therefore on the one hand we are treating them as adults and on the other victimising them or discriminating against them because they are still deemed children. I should like you to elaborate on that and also on the vagueness of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. The Committee raised the concern with officials a number of times and was told that the children were covered by it.

Ms M Kelly: My experience is that health and social services know it is happening. We examine the issues of young carers through children's and young people's committees. The problem is that they are a subgroup at the bottom of a long list, and quite often they never get as far as assessments or services. That is our community experience, and, as there is no statutory responsibility to provide such services to child carers, they never reach them. Some young carers in Barnardo's projects have not had social services provided, and sometimes we must advocate getting those services for them. The Department is aware of their needs, but children in need are not strictly defined under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. How do you ensure that such a group is assessed without excluding other groups?

Ms Caul: Our view, which is reflected in the submission and in the amendments that we have put forward, is that it is a moot point whether it is appropriate to assess a 17-year-old under current carers' legislation. You may need a dual assessment, and the legislation must reflect that. A 17-year-old has needs as a carer but also as a young person. We want something comprehensive put in place if a 17-year-old comes to the attention of social services in any of those situations. The idea of dual assessment is to examine the situation comprehensively.

We have raised the issue of schedule 2 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order. Schedule 2 sets out broad categories for expected services for children in need. We have recommended that a broad category could be "services provided to young carers". I know the Department does not agree, but such a course could remedy the situation.

Ms M Kelly: Our understanding is that the broad categories include disabled children and children receiving care. Why can we not also have young carers as a broad category?

Ms Ramsey: We raised the issue with reference to Executive programme funds when we asked officials to define children in need.

Mr McFarland: Why is this coming so late in the day? Presumably the Department has had some consultations with you on the subject. It cannot have introduced this entire raft of legislation without speaking to you. Having taken the Bill through the Committee, we suddenly have this coming at us late in the day, and I am concerned about that.

We discussed the question of 16- to 18-year-olds and were assured that they were best off, since they fell under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and were doubly protected. I am concerned about those under 16 years of age. The average age of a young carer is fourteen and a half, but does a nine-year-old have a right to demand assessment? The law says that those under 16 years of age are not considered competent. I appreciate that they get landed with all that, but in theory the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 protected them.

Ms Caul: We agree about those under 16 years of age. Our amendment proposes that they be assessed under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. There would be no question of those under 16 years of age being assessed as carers under this legislation.

Mr McFarland: The legislation excludes them from being assessed; it does not recognise them.

Ms Caul: On the contrary, it does recognise them. You cannot assess children under the legislation, but our amendment proposes that, having come to the attention of social services, a carer under 16 years of age would have to be assessed as a child in need under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. That mechanism must be in place in the legislation.

Mr McFarland: Surely this is an amendment to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 rather than to the new legislation. I do not disagree with you, but, if we have a problem under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, we should introduce an amendment to that rather than stating it in this legislation, which, legally, has nothing to do with the Order.

Ms M Kelly: Part of the problem is that, if the legislation does not recognise that anyone under 16 years of age is carrying out caring responsibilities, the matter is left wide open. However, in the legislation we recognise that there is a group of children carrying out caring responsibilities. Many of those children have heavy-duty caring responsibilities, and that caring impinges on their lives. In this carers' legislation we recognise that such a group exists, and as children they are assessed under that. However, if the carers' legislation is written in a way that does not recognise them, that will create difficulties for them as a group.

The Chairperson: We agree with the principles you suggest. Three officials will speak on the amendment shortly. The competence of the words used in the amendments is relevant.

Ms Ferguson: The provisions allowing for direct payments to disabled parents with children recognise that children should not act as carers for disabled parents. We value and welcome that, but there are those whose parents have problems they do not wish to acknowledge, meaning they will not seek help from social services. Those children are in the worst possible position, and they may be caught by these proposals.

Mr McFarland: Why is this coming so late in the consultation process?

Ms M Kelly: It is connected with our lack of familiarity with the Committee Stages of Bills and how to influence them. Early in our submissions we flagged up some of the issues, but at that point we were unaware that, if we were to make amendments, that was the best time. It is a result of our lack of familiarity with the process.

Mr McFarland: Did the Department receive your submissions and ignore them, or did it decide against them? Was it something that you produced late in the day?

Ms M Kelly: We covered those issues in our submission.

Ms McWilliams: Ms Ferguson, we can tidy up the words in your proposed amendment, where you have left out such words as "personal social services", and the typographical error in 1(1)(c) can be cleared up. Could you please explain 1(1)(b)?

Ms Ferguson: We recognised that there would also be young carers' issues and wanted to separate them. Should the Committee decide that the Bill is not placed to recognise young carers, with the other amendments going, (b) would also go.

Ms McWilliams: You have written that the carer of such an adult —

Ms Ferguson: Is over 18.

Ms McWilliams: — is over 16.

Ms Ferguson: That is how the current Bill is set up. That should say "18", given the other amendments. You are absolutely right to pick that up. There should be three sections — one relating to adult carers, one to carers under 16, and the third to carers between 16 and 18.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much; that was very helpful. The Committee agrees with the principle of what you have said, but there are technical aspects to consider. You are welcome to remain while the officials come forward. They know the situation.

Mr Deazley: The key issue in the first amendment is offering assessment to a carer, as opposed to carrying

out an assessment on request. We direct the trusts and boards, and we can cover directions and guidance accompanying the Bill. A duty can be placed on boards and trusts by direction to offer assessment. Following a user assessment, where boards and trusts are aware that there is a carer, to allow that care to continue, the carer should then be made aware of the right to an assessment.

Ms Ramsey: You say that the duty to offer an assessment is not covered in legislation but that it will be included in the guidance circular sent to boards and trusts. That comes across as cynical. I know how boards and trusts operate, so even if it is to be sent out as a circular, why not insert it into the Bill?

Mr Clarke: I am not sure what effect it would have if it replaced the existing provision. That indicates a right to request assessment and would presumably relate to any carer in the general population who might not necessarily be in contact with social services at all. However, to replace that with a provision such as that put forward

“where the authority is satisfied that the person cared for is an adult for whom it may provide social services”

suggests that social services are already in contact. I am unsure of its overall effect.

Ms Ramsey: If we agree to the amendment, we shall examine its wording. My concern is that some people do not know their rights. It is a matter of acting on a duty to inform people and making them aware of their entitlements.

Mr Clarke: All carers should know of their right to request assessment. I understand the intention; that was my concern in the amendment.

Ms Ramsey: It should be easier in the Bill.

Ms McWilliams: Your point is good, so if that is the intention, why not do both?

Mr Clarke: You are talking about two different matters. For the existing provision, the door must be kept open for everyone. The other option is more focused. One might argue that you could have both.

Ms McWilliams: That is what I suggest. I accept your point that the existing provision might eliminate someone. It should be inclusive rather than exclusive; it might then be possible.

Rev Robert Coulter: Why do you not take the converse pathway and say that all carers will be assessed except those who opt out?

Mr Deazley: That would impose a duty on the Department, boards and trusts to identify carers, or those for whom they were caring, who have no contact with the social services.

Rev Robert Coulter: Why is that the case? How would you go about doing that?

Ms Sisk: It would depend on whether we thought it achievable. We have recently received information about Scotland's approach, which is that carers should still ask for an assessment, but that the trust or board has a duty to inform them of their right to request one.

Rev Robert Coulter: How can they do that if the relevant bodies do not know who the carers are?

Ms Sisk: There would have to be a user of the service for whom the carer was responsible. The board would be aware of that user and his or her carer and would advise the latter of the right to an assessment.

Ms Ramsey: That is what Rev Robert Coulter is saying. Is there a problem with inserting into the Bill my right as a carer to be advised of my due regarding an assessment so I might ask for one?

Ms Sisk: There is no problem; we should have to ask the Minister if she were content.

Ms Ramsey: It is the duty of the social services to inform people of their right to an assessment rather than waiting for them to find out about their rights.

Ms Deazley: That is the case when social services are involved with a service user who has a carer. We do not seek out carers not in contact with social services.

Rev Robert Coulter: The situation is that, where a carer has been identified, the board will assess the situation, except where the carer has opted out.

Ms Sisk: We are suggesting that the trust officer would advise carers of the right to an assessment and allow carers to ask for it.

Rev Robert Coulter: You are putting the onus on carers. I suggest that the onus should be to advise carers of the right to assessment.

The Chairperson: The Committee must decide whether the Bill, as it stands, addresses the concerns of Barnardo's and Carers Northern Ireland. If we feel that one or two amendments are necessary, we must return to the subject next week, since the wording will have to be redrafted.

Mr McFarland: While the situation is not exactly as drafted, the effect is that, once a carer has been identified, he or she will have the right to request assessment. Can you produce an amendment to reflect that for next week, or are we expected to do that from our side? Clearly, if the Department were comfortable with what we produce —

The Chairperson: It would be up to the Committee to put forward an amendment.

Mr McFarland: I was trying to make the point that, if the Department were comfortable with the wording and slipped that to the Clerk, there would be agreement.

The Chairperson: The Clerk is very competent.

Mr McFarland: If everyone is comfortable with the wording, the legislation will go through more easily than if we produced objectionable words.

Mr Deazley: We should have to clear our lines with the Minister.

Mr McFarland: That is the point I was trying to make.

The Chairperson: It is not the responsibility of the Department to come up with amendments on our behalf. However, although Carers Northern Ireland, Barnardo's and the Children's Law Centre are agreed in principle, the wording we have here is unsuitable for amendments. Can we return to that next week and put a proposal to the Committee? The reasoning behind section 1(1) of the Barnardo's submission is that

"As the Bill currently stands there is no duty to offer an assessment only to give one if requested. This amendment would make it a duty for a carer to be offered an assessment and then they could decide whether or not to take that up."

Is the Committee content?

Mr McFarland: We have moved the goalposts slightly, but it has the same effect.

Ms Sisk: We have said to the Committee that the guidance would have required trusts to offer an assessment to a carer where they knew one existed. Now you want to state on the face of the Bill that the trust must offer that. There is probably no great difference in effect, but we must agree to change it.

Mr McFarland: My point is that those words may not be used. We should produce a formula for next week with which everyone will be comfortable.

The Chairperson: I am sure that we can do that.

Subsection 1(2) states

"Where a carer aged 16-18 years old has requested an assessment under section 1(1) the authority shall also carry out an assessment under Article 18 of the Children Order and provide services in accordance with that assessment."

Do members wish to do anything with that?

Ms Ramsey: I should prefer to hear the officials' views.

Mr Deazley: Our view is that the legislation does not exclude those under 16 years of age as it does not exclude anyone. There is no reference to age in the Bill.

Ms Sisk: It is not mentioned regarding an assessment.

Ms Ramsey: There is a problem with children between the ages of 16 and 18 being assessed as adults while still deemed children. Can you take that on board? Shall we examine 2(1)(a)?

The Chairperson: Yes. Are you content with that?

Mr McFarland: We discussed that in detail at the last meeting. I understood from this Bill that carers under 16 years of age were not legally recognised as such. The 16- to 18-year-olds were covered by the Bill and the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, and those under 18 years of age were covered by the Bill.

This proposes that a section be inserted into the Bill stating that those under 16 years of age are recognised as carers. Although it says in the submission that the average age of carers is fourteen and a half, a much younger child could be identified as a carer.

At what age does that right commence? At what age can a child be deemed a carer? From the information it seems that those under 16 years of age were not legally recognised as carers. Is that correct? That seems to go against what you just said. The Bill does not say that you are not such.

Ms Sisk: In the part of the Bill relating to carers' assessment, the definition of carer does not have an age limit. In theory, a carer could be any age. When it comes to providing a service to carers, as opposed to assessing their needs, we do not see any services being provided to children under the legislation. Carers under 16 years of age are children first and carers second. Their needs should be dealt with under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. That is the Department's policy; we do not want children dragged into adult legislation.

Mr McFarland: If they are not recognised as carers when it comes to providing them with a service, there is little point in recognising them as carers for an assessment. Even if they were assessed under a right contained in the Bill, they could not be given any support, since it is against departmental policy anyway.

Ms Sisk: They could certainly get support, but it would be as a child in need under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

Mr McFarland: But they are already entitled to that under the Order.

Ms Sisk: Yes. The legislation recognises that children can be carers. That is an implicit recognition, in that no age limit is imposed. The policy would not provide support to a child carer under the legislation. They would be dealt with as children in need under children's legislation.

Mr McFarland: It was said that Barnardo's and other organisations were keen for the legislation to recognise that explicitly; you say that it is implicit. Those organisations are asking for an explicit recognition that those under 16 years of age can be carers, though they will be dealt with under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

Ms Ramsey: A key issue in a previous presentation concerned the definition of children in need. There are

so many definitions that, by the time it gets to carers, children are further down the scale. You said that, while the legislation relates to adults, it does not remove anyone from the equation. Subsection 2(1) of the Bill mentions assessments for carers aged 16 or over. You said that carers under 16 years of age should theoretically be taken into account under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which is why they are not included in the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill.

The Committee examined the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 in its inquiry into children and young people. We found that young people may be recognised as carers from any age, but under the Order they seem to be taken out of the loop.

Ms McWilliams: As I understand it, the legislation relates to those aged 16 and over. Is there anything on the statute book that prevents the recognition of carers under 16 years of age?

Ms Sisk: There is nothing on the statute book to prevent that.

Ms McWilliams: Are you suggesting that a legal difficulty would arise if you recognised someone under 16 years of age for a role in conflict with another piece of legislation?

Ms Sisk: My worry concerns not so much law as policy. Mr Clarke is the best person to talk about the children's aspect, since adults are my area of expertise. That is why I am concerned about the recognition of children.

Mr Clarke: A point was made in the presentation about the purpose of the assessment of need. Under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 the assessment of need would be related to children's needs as such. Reference has been made to the rather convoluted formula in the Order. I can share that with you, but it is a very general definition of need aimed at the assessment of needs as children, whereas this legislation — as I understand it — concerns the assessment of needs as carers. The question is whether children should be carers. Children should not be prevented from being carers, for that would be impossible to enforce.

However, there is a difference of policy approach in the two categories. The focus on children concerns their needs as such. If their needs or duties as carers are leading to their becoming children in need under the general definition of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which concerns their development, that raises a serious question. I agree with some of the thinking behind this, but a distinction must be drawn between the two groups, as a policy matter.

Ms Sisk: Absolutely. That was my point.

Mr Clarke: That was mentioned in the earlier presentation, and it has been a problem. Young carers are

referred to in the children's services planning process as an indicative category of children in need, but that is under the definition of need in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

Ms Ramsey: This legislation is for carers and is to ensure that carers are properly looked after, no matter what age they are, though the age of 16 is mentioned. Does the Department provide services for young carers through any funding it gives to the boards, trusts or voluntary agencies? I know that it funds Barnardo's.

Mr Clarke: The Department does not categorise funding for individual services, and it does not categorise what the money relates to. The principle of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 is that resources are provided. In response to a broad definition of assessed need, a range of services is developed. That is intended to create flexibility as to priorities. Our children's services planning guidance document stems from the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. There is a legal responsibility to produce children's services plans. The guidance for that mentioned indicative categories of need, and the needs of young carers was one category. Money does not emanate from the Department for the service.

Ms Ramsey: The Department has accepted the existence of young carers. Why are they not protected in this legislation?

Mr Clarke: I understand that it is because the legislation is focused on the needs of people as carers. The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 concerns children's needs as such, and those children may be carers.

Ms McWilliams: The Committee visited the Mater Hospital this morning, after which I visited the maternity unit, where a 14-year-old girl had just given birth. There were certain questions about whether the baby would have disabilities. Though under 16 years of age, the mother would become a carer of her own child and would therefore need assessment. You are saying that she would be taken care of under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, but I assume that her child would also be taken care of under the Order, for the woman in question is now a mother, despite the fact that she is 14 years old. If the legislation had this amendment in it, I assume she could ask for an assessment as a mother.

Mr Clarke: As a mother and as a carer. That is difficult, since she is also a child.

Ms McWilliams: From now on, health and social services and all the other organisations that help young mothers will, to all intents and purposes, be calling her a young parent or young adult, even though she is under 16 years of age.

Mr Clarke: That is true. There are different assessments for different purposes, but an assessment should

cover a person's needs. Sometimes we get into a state about what legislation an assessment is under.

Ms McWilliams: Ms Ramsey's point, and the point that we have just made regarding the previous section, is that, if we have a piece of legislation, we should try to be as inclusive as possible. That is the message of the evidence you heard.

Mr Clarke: Indeed. However, schedule 2 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 currently permits assessments to be carried out simultaneously with any assessments under other legislation. It states that an assessment can be carried out at the same time as an assessment under certain listed legislation, meaning those assessments could be co-ordinated. I appreciate that there is a difficulty; you have raised the interesting problem of the person being both carer and child.

The Chairperson: Barnardo's and others have raised issues that the Committee members feel must be addressed by way of amendment. From listening to you, I doubt that you would entirely disagree with that. The worrying must be got over and formal amendments brought forward. We probably cannot gain much by continuing this discussion, but real issues and concerns have been put forward by Carers Northern Ireland and by Barnardo's.

Mr McFarland: But there is a fundamental disagreement on the issue. It is a policy of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland. It is not a matter of messing around with the law. The Department does not recognise those under 16 years of age as carers.

Ms Sisk: They are not recognised as carers first, for they are children first. Our policy is that they be dealt with under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

Mr McFarland: It is difficult to reconcile that with what Barnardo's and others want: to give legal recognition to children under 16 as carers. We shall not get around that with words. Unless the Department accepts that its policy must change, it will not agree to our adding words to the Bill accepting those under 16 years old as carers. If it is against departmental policy, there would simply be a block, and the Department would say no. We can continue to argue about this, but the difficulty is that the process is well advanced. We could stop here and start the whole discussion again. Is the legislation not currently on track?

The Chairperson: Can you examine the matter again?

Ms Sisk: It is down for its Consideration Stage on 25 February.

The Committee Clerk: Amendments being put forward must be in by Thursday 21 February. If the Committee is to adopt any amendments, they would have to come before it on Wednesday 20.

Mr McFarland: I am satisfied that we can probably find a form of words to get round the first point. We have not yet discussed the 16- to 18-year-olds. We thought that it was agreed last time that they fell under both pieces of legislation and were therefore doubly protected under the law. We can discuss the matter in a moment. We could have an ongoing debate between either Mr Deazley or yourself and the Department in the meantime to find out whether there is any meeting of minds on changing the policy on under-16-year-olds completely. However, even if we sat here all next week, we should be unlikely to agree with the Department on a form of words to change that policy. Perhaps that is wrong, and the Minister would be content to change her policy.

The Chairperson: The Clerk and I are to meet the Minister tomorrow, though not specifically on this matter. However, we could certainly raise it. Of course, we cannot expect an answer from the Minister at such short notice. Perhaps you might also examine it and consider the issue raised by Alan McFarland; we shall inform the Minister tomorrow. As I said earlier, the Committee members feel that the issues are important.

The Committee Clerk: We can examine several other issues and see how far we can address them.

Ms Ramsey: I assume that the third one is acceptable. It seems that we are talking about children under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

The Chairperson: Are members happy?

Mr McFarland: The key thing is that, if we are not to fall behind, the matter must be ready for agreement by the Committee next week. If we miss that deadline, we are delaying matters.

The Chairperson: That is a fair point.

Ms McWilliams: We shall meet our dates.

The Chairperson: We shall meet our dates. Peter Deazley, Margaret Sisk and John Clarke, thank you very much.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 20 February 2002

**PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES
(AMENDMENT) BILL
(NIA 1/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mr J Kelly
Ms McWilliams
Ms Ramsey
Mrs I Robinson
Mr McFarland

Clause 1 (Right of carers to assessment)

The Committee Clerk: Members will have received separate papers on the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill. I sent a briefing note to members on 18 February outlining the concerns raised by the voluntary organisations, which appeared before the Committee, and attached to that were the proposed amendments. I have discussed the issue with the legal adviser to seek, as far as possible, suitable wording for the proposed amendments that the organisations have brought forward. For members' attention, several clauses, with possible alternatives, were listed at the bottom of my briefing note. Members must be aware that the amendments before them have been drafted by lay people and are not legal drafts, so there may be issues of competency regarding the wording. However, the intent reflects the concerns raised by the organisations.

I have also discussed the issue with the Department and the organisations concerned. Members have a letter before them which the Department sent me on 19 February. The letter outlines the Department's concerns about the proposed amendments that deal with children, and it reflects a concern raised by one of the members in a meeting last week about the Department's policy on children. Officials have explained that there is a potential conflict with regard to the Department's policy on children acting as carers. It said that, in their view, the proposed amendments on children would run counter to

the Department's policy on children and that, if passed by the Assembly, they would recognise legally that children could be seen as carers first, rather than being entitled to support as children. That could be seen as restricting rather than enhancing children's rights, and the Minister, if she agrees with the officials' advice, is likely to oppose those amendments.

I received a letter from the organisations this morning stating that they have agreed to the intent of our wording and support the proposed alternative points to amendments 1 and 2 and also the reference to allow carers aged 16 or 17 to request an assessment. There was also reference to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

Members must bear in mind the various proposals placed before them. Clause 1A is presented as a possible substitute for clause 1(1), and that wording is very close to the voluntary organisations' proposal. It targets carers aged 16 or over and makes the boards of trusts responsible for assessments. It is more prescriptive than the existing clause and compels the trust to approach the carer, whether or not that carer desires such an approach. The Assembly's legal adviser had questioned whether there was a suitable trigger mechanism if that clause were put in place.

The Chairperson: The proposal is that members vote on 1B, which voluntary organisations have expressed their support for. If that were accepted, then proposal 1A would obviously be dropped.

The Committee Clerk: Members should note that 1A, the first of those two amendments to clause 1, is a substitute.

Clause 1, page 1, line 4, leave out subsection (1) and insert-

“() Where-

- (a) an authority is satisfied that a person cared for is an adult for whom it may provide personal social services; and
- (b) the carer of that person is aged 16 or over,

The authority shall offer that carer an assessment of the carer's ability to provide and continue to provide care for the person cared for and if requested by the carer shall carry out such an assessment.”

All the organisations stated that 1B, the second alternative, would be an acceptable clause. The new subsection would therefore read

- () It shall be the duty of an authority to disseminate information widely regarding the right of carers to an assessment of the carer's ability to provide and to continue to provide care for the person cared for.
- () An authority shall take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that carers within the authority's area receive the information relevant to them.”

That is intended to require boards and trusts to be proactive in disseminating information and in taking reasonable steps to ensure that those carers receive the information available to them. It would precede the existing clause 1(1) of the Bill.

The Chairperson: Have voluntary organisations shown their support for that?

The Committee Clerk: Yes.

The Chairperson: The Bill and the motion are in front of you. If members accept those, we shall move on. Is that agreed?

Ms McWilliams: Do we accept the letter from Barnardos and the others stating their support for the proposed alternative points 1 and 2 of the amendment?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Question put and agreed to.

The Chairperson: We shall proceed to the next amendment.

The Committee Clerk: A second proposal has been placed in front of members. That proposal introduces a new subsection to clause 1(2). It targets carers aged 16 and 17 and reflects the wording used by the voluntary organisations. It would require boards and trusts to carry out an assessment under the Bill that would comply with the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. The letter from the Department of Health and Social Services, dated 19 February, comments on the role of carers aged 16 and 17. Members have that letter in front of them.

The Chairperson: It is important.

The Committee Clerk: Page two of that letter from the Department states that

“With regard to 16 and 17 year old carers, it is our intention that this Bill will only rarely be used when looking at the needs of this group. As with young people under 16, the intention would be that support services should be provided to the disabled adult so as to ensure that a young person is not undertaking regular and substantial caring responsibilities that undermine their ability to participate fully in education, training, work or social activities.”

It goes on to state that

“a young person of 16 or 17 may make the choice in some circumstances to assume caring responsibilities, for example when a parent is terminally ill. In these circumstances, we consider that it is appropriate that services could be provided to the young person to support him in his caring role rather than to simply reduce it.”

The point made by the Department is that the Bill as it stands would expect guidance to be issued to clarify those kinds of matters. The voluntary organisations have supported that proposed amendment. What I have gathered from talking to departmental officials is that there is a slightly grey area regarding how far the Department might oppose that, or whether it will accept it; its position is still unclear.

In its letter dated 19 February the Department clearly stated that it would not be content with the inclusion of references to children under 16 in the Bill, since it feels that it could restrict rather than enhance the rights of children.

However, it recognises that those 16- or 17-year-old carers have a role to play in caring for disabled adults.

The Chairperson: A central point of that letter states that

“We have made it clear in our evidence to the Committee that it is the policy of the Department that young carers under 16 should be seen as children first, and carers second, and should not be expected to carry levels of caring responsibility that could adversely affect their education and development.”

The Chairperson: I beg to move

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: in page 1, line 11 insert.

“() Where a carer aged 16 or 17 has requested an assessment under subsection (1) the authority shall carry out an assessment that complies with Article 18 of the Children Order and provide services in accordance with that assessment.”

Ms McWilliams: Where is that reference taken from?

The Chairperson: I am reading from page three of the Committee Clerk’s briefing note.

Ms McWilliams: It is important to get the legislation right as we go through these amendments, so perhaps the pages of the briefing note might be numbered. We could follow the paragraph numbers for easy reference. We are working with three documents, and the proceedings are difficult to follow.

The Chairperson: We are on proposal 2.

“A new subsection to clause 1(2) would target carers aged 16 to 17...”

That reflects the wording used by the voluntary organisations,

“... and requires HSS boards or trusts to carry out an assessment under the PSS (Amendment) Bill that complies with the Children Order.”

The Committee Clerk: The Department may well object to that, but you will note from the Department’s letter of 19 February that it recognises that there is a role for 16- to 17-year-olds. The Department’s final position is unclear.

Ms McWilliams: I propose that we table that amendment and speak about it. The Minister will respond, and that will give everyone an opportunity to have a say and clarify the situation. The Department’s letter is contradictory. On the one hand it recognises that children under 16 should be seen as children, while on the other hand acknowledging that the 16- to 17-year-olds, like those under 16, may require support services. The question arises as to where the assessment comes in, and we need to have that clarified.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: in page 1, line 11 insert

“() Where a carer aged 16 or 17 has requested an assessment under subsection (1) the authority shall carry out an assessment that complies with Article 18 of the Children Order and provide services in accordance with that assessment.”

Question put and agreed to.

The Committee Clerk: Under the third proposal, members have the choice of either 3A or 3B. The voluntary organisation stated in its correspondence that 3B would be a suitable amendment. I wanted to bring that to the Committee's attention in the light of the Department's letter, which answers concerns raised by Mr McFarland last week about the Department's policy on children.

Departmental officials explained to me that the proposed amendments on children would, in their view, run counter to the Department's policy on children. If passed by the Assembly, the amendments would legally recognise that children could be seen as carers first, rather than being entitled to support as children. That could be seen as restricting children's rights, rather than enhancing them. The Minister, if she agrees with the officials' advice, is likely to oppose the amendments relating to children.

I shall read the amendments out. Amendment 3A states, in clause 1, page 1, line 11 insert

“Where an authority is satisfied that —

- (a) the person cared for is an adult for whom it may provide personal social services; and
- (b) the carer of that person is aged under 16,

that carer shall be treated as a child in need under article 18 of the Children Order and the authority shall carry out an assessment under that article and provide services in accordance with that assessment.”

The amendment that we propose, and which the voluntary organisations accept, is amendment 3B, which reads

“After Schedule 2, Part 7 of the Children Order there shall be inserted-

“Services for children defined as carers

7A. Every authority shall provide services designed to give children defined as carers under section 8 of the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Act 2002 the opportunity to live lives as normal as possible.”

That word had been taken from the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Amendment 3A was an attempt to meet the needs of voluntary organisations without being quite as prescriptive as 3B. I want to ensure that the Committee is aware of the Department's position on both amendments, which the Committee is likely to oppose.

Mr McFarland: My apologies for being late; I was in another meeting that I could not leave.

I am concerned that we are setting ourselves up as an adjudicator between the voluntary sector's view and the Department's clear policy on the law, which is not the Committee's job. We should ask the various voluntary groups and the Department to produce an agreed system

for that. I cannot understand why the Department and voluntary groups both have clear, adamant policies on the law which are chalk and cheese.

The Chairperson: Have you seen the letter dated 19 February?

Mr McFarland: Yes. I have a copy. In response to the Committee's request, the Department has clearly explained the policy. However, we are being asked to recommend an amendment contrary to the Department's policy. It could be argued that the Committee has limited knowledge of such matters, apart from what we hear. We are in danger of deciding, on the basis of the modest evidence that we have received, to go against the Department. That is a slightly dicey thing to do — unless we are convinced that it is right.

The Committee Clerk: The amendments were put to the Committee to allow discussion. The Committee can reject the amendments if it feels unable to adopt them. Individual members must decide whether they wish to agree them. I felt duty bound to put both the proposals and the Department's objections before the Committee.

Ms McWilliams: I take Mr McFarland's point. One of the Committee's functions is to tease out areas where there may be anomalies between policy and what ends up in legislation. This is a good example of where policy may have to be updated or amended. The Department accepts that some children are also carers, despite the policy that argues that they should be treated as children first. I said last week that mothers can be carers, since they can give birth before the age of 16.

What has happened is not contradictory; it is quite useful. The evidence shows that we attempt to be as inclusive as possible when making legislation rather than leave the groups concerned with few alternatives. That is why we find ourselves trying to find amendments acceptable to the Department and the sector. We have managed to do so thus far. There was a meeting of minds on the previous amendment, but we may have more difficulty with this one.

The Chairperson: If we suggest an amendment, and the Department disagrees for technical or other reasons, suggesting its own, we can withdraw our suggestion, providing that the Department's amendment deals with our concerns.

Mr McFarland: I agree with Ms McWilliams that the Committee is supposed to act in this way. There would not have been a problem if the information had arrived during our deliberations, since we could have extended our time to study it. My concern is that we had already examined the matter when a great deal of new information was parachuted in at the last minute. We are now working to a tight schedule. We cannot spend a further three weeks on the matter, for the Bill will soon be before the House. I am concerned that we

are required to make a decision at quite short notice and with only limited information. It would be interesting to tease out all the information and seek further legal opinion and advice from groups that have not yet appeared before the Committee.

I do not disagree with what is being said. Could we encourage the Department and the groups concerned to put their heads together once again so that we can devise an agreed system? I feel uncomfortable going against departmental medical policy unless there is a clear reason to support the alternative. As you know, I have no problem with championing causes that go against the Department. However, I am not sure that we have enough evidence to challenge the established policy readily.

Ms Ramsey: I agree with Ms McWilliams and Mr McFarland. To clarify matters, Mr McFarland, are you suggesting that, rather than dismiss the amendments, we should ask those with an interest in the matter to meet the Department to see if they can devise something?

Mr McFarland: Such amendments would be acceptable, providing that they dealt with the strong concerns which carers communicated to the Committee, and providing that the Committee agreed with them.

Ms Ramsey: Is it correct that such an approach would not prevent the Committee from re-examining the matter if the Department disagreed?

The Committee Clerk: The Bill is before the House and is due for its Consideration Stage. The Department has made clear its aims regarding the Bill. In a letter dated 19 February, it stated what its position would be if amendments concerning children under 16 were tabled. The Department views those amendments as potentially restricting the rights of children. It said that it would seek to address the issues concerning children under 16 by producing detailed guidance to boards and trusts on how to treat those under 16 providing care to disabled adults. The Department would seek to provide families with resources to release those children from their duties, as opposed to placing a duty on children by legally recognising them as carers.

The Department has serious concerns about the two amendments. The Committee has put amendments before the Department. However, owing to its concerns, the Department will not seek to amend those. The Minister will object to the amendments as they stand, since they run counter to the Bill's intent. The Committee must decide whether it wishes to adopt those amendments.

The Chairperson: Is it correct to say that the Consideration Stage is scheduled for Tuesday 26 February?

The Committee Clerk: The Consideration Stage may have been delayed. The new date may be the following week. Although that gives some leeway, the Committee should decide how it handles those points.

Mr McFarland: I welcome Ms McWilliams's comment. Will an amendment to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 deal with the matter? One way to address the concerns of the under-16s is to amend that so that child carers are considered.

The Committee Clerk: Motion 3B changes the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. That is not as prescriptive as 3A, and voluntary organisations have accepted it.

Mr McFarland: Would the Department accept that?

The Committee Clerk: I understand that the Department would accept neither 3A nor 3B.

Mr McFarland: As 3B is an attempt to cover the issue by leaving the Bill alone so that it does not interfere with the Department's policy, and as the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 recognises that children can be carers, what are the Department's objections? The wording may not be ideal, but the question is once again whether the Department and the voluntary organisations should get their heads together to find suitable wording.

Ms Ramsey: I should like to discuss the Department's note. One or two points strike me. For example, on the first page of that document it says

"We would expect that Trusts should provide services to the disabled adult so as to ensure that the child does not have to carry out inappropriate levels of caring."

I expect trusts and boards to perform many tasks which they do not fulfil, and I am concerned about that.

The Committee Clerk: In answer to Ms Ramsey's point, when I discussed the matter with representatives of the Department they hinted that they wished to involve the Committee at the necessary stage when drafting guidance. They said that they would be reasonably willing to prescribe what they want boards and trusts to do.

Ms Ramsey: The other issue I wished to raise concerns the following page of the Department's note. The last line states its intention to ensure that

"a young person is not undertaking regular or substantial caring responsibilities that undermine their ability to participate fully in education, training, work or social activities."

That concerns me, since one minute it says that 16- to 17-year-olds can be carers but the next says that it must ensure that a young person does not undertake that role. The following paragraph says that a young person of 16 to 17 may make the choice in some circumstances to assume a carer's responsibilities. Some do not have the choice.

The Committee Clerk: In those two paragraphs, the Department sought to recognise that at times 16- and 17-year olds are old enough and responsible enough to take on certain caring duties where appropriate. That is why it differentiates between those under and those over 16.

The Chairperson: How shall we proceed? The Department is clearly unhappy, and the Consideration Stage is scheduled for the week beginning Monday 4 March. Is there any point in having further discussions with the Department at this stage?

The Committee Clerk: The Department has made its views fairly clear, and rehearsing the issue will not change the position. It is up to the Committee to make a decision on whether it wishes to accept, for example, 3B, or to decline that amendment, and if individual members wish to raise that they can.

The Chairperson: What are the Committee's views? Do members wish to decline 3B in view of what has been said?

Ms McWilliams: I reiterate that the Department's letter is internally contradictory. It recognises that such people are carers. It may wish that young people did not have to do so, but that is pointless.

The evidence we have taken to date shows that there are individuals in Northern Ireland who are under 16, and others aged 16 and 17, who currently undertake such duties, either because a parent is terminally ill — and the Department recognises that — or because they have no one else to care for them. If the Committee has taken that evidence and recognises that those individuals

exist, it should proceed with the amendment. The whole purpose of legislation is to make people's lives better; we have an opportunity to do so. This legislation allows those duties to be recognised, rather than ignoring them and hoping that they will be picked up elsewhere. We should go forward with it.

The Committee Clerk: The motion was that 3B should be adopted by the Committee.

Mr McFarland: So 3A is out. To recap, 3B leaves the present legislation intact, instead changing the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 to recognise children as carers.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: in clause 1, page 1, line 11, insert

“() After Schedule 2, Part 7 of the Children Order there shall be inserted-

“Services for children defined as carers

7A. Every authority shall provide services designed to give children defined as carers under section 8 of the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Act 200x the opportunity to live lives which are as normal as possible.”

Question put and agreed to.

Written Answers

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 25 January 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Victims of Terrorism

Mr Gibson asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on its policy for assisting the victims of terrorism. (AQW 849/01)

Reply: [*holding answer 15 January 2002*]: In July 2001 the Department established a victims unit to take forward work to raise awareness of, and co-ordinate activity on, issues affecting victims across the devolved administration and an inter-departmental working group on victims, chaired by the Junior Ministers, Dermot Nesbitt and Denis Haughey, who have specific responsibility for victims issues, has been established and meets at regular intervals.

In recent months junior Ministers, Nesbitt and Haughey, have met with representatives of over 30 victims' groups to hear their views.

Earlier this year research was commissioned into the current level of service provision to victims. A summary of that report has recently been sent to all those who took part in the exercise along with an action plan indicating how the findings might be taken forward. A copy of the report and the action plan are available on the internet at www.victimsni.gov.uk and copies have also been placed in the Assembly Library. The research will also help to inform the development of a victims' strategy aimed at providing high quality help and services to address the needs of victims.

In August 2001 a consultation paper on a victims' strategy was issued which sought views on both the strategy itself and on a number of specific questions asked throughout the paper. The consultation period ended on 9 November 2001 and the responses are currently being considered. It is envisaged that the strategy will be published and in place early in 2002 and will cover the period up until 2004.

In addition, Peace II contains a specific measure for victims with funding of £6.67 million, of which £1.67 million comes from the Executive. The victims unit has been working on the development of this measure and the first call for applications was made recently.

East-West Links

Mrs Carson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what measures are being looked at in strengthening the development of east-west links. (AQO 633/01)

Reply: The development of relations and co-operation on an east-west basis has been identified as one of the Executive's priorities under the Programme for Government. The main mechanism for doing so is the British-Irish Council, which was established under the Belfast Agreement to promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands.

The sectoral areas currently covered by the British-Irish Council are environment, drugs, knowledge economy, social inclusion, transport, tourism and health with a focus on telemedicine.

Under the Memorandum of Understanding and supplementary agreements between the UK Government, Northern Ireland Executive, Scottish Executive and Welsh Assembly, a Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC), which comprises representatives of the above administrations, has been established. The Committee's role is to consider non-devolved matters that impinge on devolved responsibilities and vice-versa.

This forum can also consider devolved matters where all parties agree that there is mutual benefit in discussing their respective treatment in the different parts of the UK.

In the coming year, we intend to take forward work in the Joint Ministerial Committee on issues including health, poverty, the knowledge economy and Europe.

A number of the Northern Ireland Departments have extensive east-west links at all working levels with their counterparts in Whitehall, Scotland and Wales. These links are across a wide range of topics and some examples are agriculture, animal health, veterinary matters, trade, industrial research and technology, energy issues, information age initiative, water issues and cultural and linguistic ties.

"Plain English"

Mr Hussey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail its commitment to use "plain English" in all aspects of Government. (AQO 648/01)

Reply: For the past 10 years all public service providers in Northern Ireland have been encouraged to provide information which is easy to read and understand by using plain language.

The public service improvement unit encourages public service bodies to make use of organisations that have a particular expertise, such as the Plain English Campaign and Plain Language Commission, in the use of clear, customer-friendly information.

The Equality Directorate, in consultation with relevant groups, is developing guidance on making information more accessible to those members of our society most at risk from exclusion.

The Equality Directorate intends to publish good practice guidelines for widespread public consultation during 2002.

NSMC Institutional Format

Mr McElduff asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what items will be discussed at the next meeting in institutional format with Mr Brian Cowen, Minister for Foreign Affairs. (AQO 609/01)

Reply: As the joint communiqué from the first NSMC Institutional Format meeting held on 17 December 2001 confirms, the next meeting in this format will be held in the South of Ireland in April 2002. The agenda for this meeting has not yet been agreed.

Race Strategy

Mr Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what progress has been made in bringing forward a cross-departmental strategy to tackle racial inequalities as outlined in the Programme for Government. (AQO 625/01)

Reply: Work on the development of the race strategy is ongoing and will be brought forward during 2002, with subsequent implementation.

There will be a full and open consultation on the document before it is finally agreed by the Executive Committee.

Needs and Effectiveness Programme

Mr McClarty asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the areas of the needs and effectiveness programme that account for substantial public spending. (AQO 642/01)

Reply: The Executive have commissioned work on needs and effectiveness evaluations on programmes in health, education, housing, training and vocational education and financial assistance to industry. These five

areas account for some 70% of planned public spending in Northern Ireland. A further review is examining the programmes relating to culture, arts and leisure.

In addition to these six evaluations, major reviews of agriculture and regional transportation will also provide a basis for the future work on considering investment in these areas.

Northern Ireland Fire Service: State Award

Mr Dalton asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what discussions have been held with Her Majesty's Government in regard to a state award being struck for the Northern Ireland Fire Service. (AQO 595/01)

Reply: Consideration of the question of a state award for the Northern Ireland Fire Service is being taken forward by our Department. A discussion has taken place between officials of the Department and the Ceremonial Secretariat of the Cabinet Office to consider the process which would be involved in taking forward a proposal for such an award.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Reduced Export Refunds: Dairy Products

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to assist the dairy farming industry as a result of the EU Commission's reduced export refunds on dairy products. (AQW 1303/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I appreciate the importance of the dairy sector to the Northern Ireland agrifood industry and that it is heavily reliant on export markets. Therefore when export refunds on dairy products were reduced by the EU Milk and Milk Products Management Committee I asked my officials to lobby strongly at future meetings for these to be restored. Some progress was made at both the November and December Committee meetings but it is clearly not enough. I met with industry representatives earlier this month to discuss the seriousness of the situation and agree with their view that a substantial increase in export refunds is needed quickly. Following that meeting I lobbied for the support of other Agriculture Ministers throughout the UK. I have also ensured that Commissioner Fischler was made aware of the issues and the need for further increases to stimulate market demand. I trust that further increases in export refunds will be achieved at the next meeting of the Committee and that this will help to improve returns to dairy farmers.

Restricted Movement of Cattle

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to state the number of cattle herds for which movement has been restricted as a result of (a) tuberculosis (TB) outbreaks; and (b) brucellosis outbreaks. (AQW 1314/01)

Ms Rodgers:

- (a) Currently the number of cattle herds for which movement has been restricted as a result of TB outbreaks is 2,568; and
- (b) Currently the number of cattle herds for which movement has been restricted as a result of brucellosis outbreaks is 190.

Milk Quota

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount of milk quota that has been transferred from the UK to Northern Ireland in each of the past 10 years. (AQW 1317/01)

Ms Rodgers: The table below shows the amount of milk quota permanently transferred from Great Britain to Northern Ireland; the amount transferred from Northern Ireland to Great Britain and the net amount transferred to Northern Ireland.

Year	Quota transferred to NI from GB (litres)	Quota transferred to GB from NI (litres)	Net quota transferred to NI (litres)
1994/95	48,532,331	11,240,979	37,291,352
1995/96	66,054,201	11,827,677	54,226,524
1996/97	60,934,365	9,869,423	51,064,942
1997/98	73,063,650	10,351,766	62,711,884
1998/99	53,022,287	13,309,188	39,713,099
1999/00	35,402,660	11,793,622	23,609,038
2000/01	30,090,727	16,603,586	13,487,141

Figures are not available for earlier years. In this respect you will wish to note that the Rural Payments Agency (previously known as the Intervention Board) assumed responsibility for maintaining the milk quota register on 1 April 1994 and statistics are only available from that date. Also prior to 1 April 1993 the transfer of wholesale quota between regions of the UK was not permitted.

Hill Farmers: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on the problems facing hill farmers in west Tyrone. (AQW 1371/01)

Ms Rodgers: Many of the problems facing hill farmers in west Tyrone are similar to those facing farmers elsewhere in Northern Ireland and beyond. They have their origins in the constantly evolving nature of markets, economies, social trends and consumer tastes and preferences, both nationally and internationally, and in the support and trade policy agenda of the major trading blocs and nations.

For the most part, these are matters over which governments have little or no direct control, and most certainly not the Northern Ireland Executive. That is why it is so important that we devise strategies for coping with the challenges, and the opportunities, that change inevitably brings. This is, to a very large extent, what the vision exercise is all about and why I attach such importance to it.

Meat Imports

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to improve the controls over the importation of meat; and to make a statement. (AQW 1373/01)

Ms Rodgers: Imports of meat from member states and third countries are governed by the Fresh Meat (Import Conditions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997, which require imports to be in accordance with EU Directives 72/461/EEC and 72/462/EEC as amended. These Directives lay down rules concerning the health problems affecting intra-community trade, require that meat has been obtained from animals slaughtered in approved establishments and provide that all imports must be accompanied by any certificate or document required for any of the purposes of the Regulations.

Trade in meat coming from Great Britain is subject to licensing under the Landing of Carcases and Animal Products Order (Northern Ireland) 1985 (as amended).

Meat imports are also subject to veterinary checks. For those imported from member states and Great Britain the checks will be carried out at point of destination. However imports from third countries are carried out at border inspection posts and must undergo full documentary, identity and physical checks and such checks must be paid for.

Since the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Great Britain imports of meat have been subject to additional controls in line with the relevant EC decisions. I have also increased staffing levels substantially at both Northern Ireland border inspection posts and I plan to continue with these levels in order to maintain the controls on imports.

My officials are currently considering a publicity drive to make people travelling abroad more aware of their responsibilities in the possible threat to the Northern

Ireland economy when bringing meat and dairy products back into Northern Ireland.

I have no plans at present to increase the controls on the import of meat.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment she has made of how the mid-term review of the common agricultural policy will be affected by the enlargement of the EU; and to make a statement. (AQW 1374/01)

Ms Rodgers: EU enlargement is one of the factors that will bring pressure to bear for a significant reform of the CAP at some point in time. Whether this occurs at the mid-term review of the Agenda 2000 agreement is open to question. Accession negotiations with prospective members of the European Union are ongoing. It is expected that the first full agreements will not be completed until the end of this year at the earliest. Therefore, it is difficult to give a precise indication at this time as to the effect of enlargement on the CAP, particularly as negotiations are only now starting to deal with the difficult and complex chapters associated with food and agriculture.

Initial proposals from the EU Commission on the mid-term review of the Agenda 2000 agreement are not expected until the middle of this year. Obviously, the Commission will be mindful of influences such as enlargement and the WTO negotiations when making these proposals, but it will also be acutely aware of the variable political appetite for reform among the existing 15 member states. In making its proposals, the Commission will not wish to prejudice its position in the enlargement and WTO talks. Whatever it proposes will obviously be the subject of considerable discussion and negotiation among the existing member states. Given these unknowns, it is not possible at this time to give an assessment of the impact of enlargement specifically on the mid-term review.

Illegal Dumping on Forestry Land

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the measures taken to prevent illegal dumping on forestry land.

(AQW 1381/01)

Ms Rodgers: In order to deter illegal dumping Forest Service protects and maintains boundaries around forest land owned by it and co-operates with the Department of the Environment in the same regard in respect of its lands. Where Forest Service staff become aware of the dumping of waste or of items left these are removed as quickly as possible in the interests of

health and safety and because it can attract the attention of others seeking to dump illegally.

Within the Forest Service by-laws there is a penalty of up to £100 for anyone who drops or leaves rubbish, refuse or litter.

Forest Walkways

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to extend the amount of forestry land available for public walkways. (AQW 1382/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Forest Service manages around 75,000 hectares of land. The service operates an open access policy and the public is encouraged to make use of most of this land for recreational, sporting and educational purposes. There are something like 2 million visits to state forests each year. In addition, through its community woodland supplement the Forest Service gives support to the development by private owners of woodlands for recreational use.

A review of forest policy is examining all aspects of strategic forestry development, including the potential for increased use of existing forests and for forest expansion to more effectively meet the economic, environmental and social needs of the community. I am keen for forests to become more widely accessible and used both by tourists and local people.

It is expected that a draft policy paper will be issued for public consultation before the summer of 2002. Through this process I look forward to considering representations from all stakeholders, including MLAs.

Export Refunds For Milk Powders

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she has taken to increase export refunds to encourage EU export of milk powder. (AQW 1398/01)

Ms Rodgers: In recognition of the deteriorating market situation I asked my officials to lobby strongly for increased export refunds for milk powders at the November and December EU Milk and Milk Products Management Committee and welcome the increases which were announced. Since then I have met with industry representatives to hear at first hand of the seriousness of the situation. It is clear that while the increases to date have been helpful a further substantial increase is needed. I therefore lobbied for the support of the other Agriculture Ministers at our recent meeting. I have also ensured that Commissioner Fischler was made aware of the seriousness of the situation. My officials will continue to press the Northern Ireland case at the regular Management Committee meetings in Brussels. I can assure you that it is my objective to secure a further increase in export refunds for milk powders.

Date-Based Export Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how long will it take the farming community to upgrade their records to meet the criteria for the date-based export scheme. (AQW 1423/01)

Ms Rodgers: Currently, approximately 57% of cattle in Northern Ireland already meet the criteria for the date-based export scheme. The remainder will not become eligible due to late notification of births or movements, or lack of dam survival confirmation. Record keeping does not form part of the eligibility criteria.

Date-Based Export Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farmers meet the criteria to export under the date-based export scheme.

(AQW 1424/01)

Ms Rodgers: Technically, virtually every cattle farmer in Northern Ireland could potentially avail of the date-based export scheme (DBES). The criteria for the Scheme is based on individual animal eligibility and therefore any producer could have both DBES eligible and ineligible cattle in his herd at any given point in time.

Date-Based Export Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to ensure farmers keep the correct records to enable them to export under the date-based export scheme. (AQW 1425/01)

Ms Rodgers: Maintenance of farm records is not a precondition of eligibility for the date-based export scheme, which is based on traceability information held on the APHIS computer database. Farm records are however an important element of the system enabling producers to notify the Department accurately of births, deaths and movements.

Department officials encourage producers to notify these events promptly and accurately by providing them with information registered on APHIS. The recent launch of the Rural Portal Service, which provides farmers with direct access to APHIS records for their herds, is a significant example of this commitment. The Department also carries out inspections at markets, abattoirs and on farms to monitor compliance.

Ballynahinch River: Drainage Scheme

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made in implementing a drainage scheme for the Ballynahinch River. (AQW 1435/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am pleased to confirm that a flood alleviation scheme on the Ballynahinch River commenced on 4 June 2001 was completed by Rivers Agency on 17 August 2001.

The completed scheme will significantly reduce the risk of flooding to properties previously affected in 1997.

Burren River: Drainage Scheme

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on her plans to carry out a drainage scheme on the Burren River in the vicinity of Newcastle. (AQW 1437/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am pleased to confirm that a viable scheme has been identified to alleviate the recurrent flooding problem from the lower reaches of the Burren River. Rivers Agency is proceeding with the design and is currently engaged in discussions with landowners, statutory authorities and various interest groups, prior to public exhibition of the scheme. Works are programmed to commence in 2003 but adherence to this programme is dependent on agreements being achieved among a diversity of interested parties.

Suckler Cow Premiums

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) the reason for the delay in the payment of suckler cow premiums which were due in November 2001; and (b) what action she proposes to take to ensure future prompt payment of all subsidies. (AQW 1445/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's annual profile of premia payments for 2001-02 set out the timetable for the payment of agriculture subsidies. In relation to 2001 suckler cow premium, the profile indicated that claims received up to the end of September 2001 would be paid between mid November and 31 December 2001 with subsequent claims payable within three months of receipt.

Payments of suckler cow premium have been made as follows:

82% of claims received up to the end of September were paid by 31 December 2001.

At 18 January 2001:

62% of claims received in October 2001 were paid;

20% of claims received during November 2001 were paid:

6% of claims received in December 2001 were paid.

Under European Commission Regulations premium may only be paid when a claim has been validated in accordance with EC legislation and strict scheme rules.

To ensure that the payment of subsidies operates smoothly I have asked the Department to carry out an assessment of the present arrangements and for any necessary further improvements to be put in place as a matter of urgency.

Rural Proofing

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will make a statement on rural proofing. (AQO 632/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Executive Colleagues and I remain fully committed to the principle of rural proofing, which was, of course, referred to in last year's Programme for Government. I have recently written to my Executive Colleagues outlining the proposals for the procedures to implement this policy effectively. I am confident that as soon as agreement on these proposals has been reached, the inter-departmental group, which I will chair, will hold its first meeting.

Assistance for Farming Community

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what specific measures is she introducing to assist the farming community of west Tyrone in achieving viability and sustainability. (AQO 604/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department provides a very extensive range of practical and financial help and support to the agricultural industry throughout Northern Ireland and these benefit the farmers of west Tyrone in the same way that they benefit farmers elsewhere. Examples include business and technical advice, training and education, animal disease control and eradication, research and development and technology transfer, to name but a few. The administration of support payments to farmers amounting to some £200 million per annum is a further graphic illustration of the work of my Department in support of the industry. The Department also operates measures such as the rural development programme which aims to identify the widest possible range of opportunity and need in rural areas and to respond to this through community, sectoral and agribusiness activities. For example, the natural resource rural tourism initiative will aim to develop sustainable tourism in five of Northern Ireland's disadvantaged rural areas, one of which is the Sperrins. You will also be aware that I announced a £2 million package under the Programme for Government for a beef quality initiative which will be particularly relevant to farmers in areas such as west Tyrone where suckler calf production is a major enterprise. I am hopeful that it will be possible to commence implementing this particular initiative in early spring.

Fish Species: Quota Allocations

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment she has made of the annual quota allocations for each fish species as a result of the December 2000 European Council of Ministers' meeting; and to make a statement. (AQO 598/01)

Ms Rodgers: This was a long and arduous council, particularly as we were faced with proposals for extremely severe cuts in stocks including those of particular interest to the local industry. I do believe however that the best possible deal for Northern Ireland was obtained in the circumstances. I was successful in obtaining an increase in the nephrops total allowable catch from the proposed 14,175 tonnes to 17,790 tonnes.

This was no mean achievement bearing in mind that the European Commission proposal was for a 25% cut in this total allowable catch and their reluctance to accept any increase because of their view that the by catch in this fishery includes stocks under threat. In addition increases above the Commission's proposals were obtained for such stocks as Irish Sea cod, plaice, sole and haddock.

Whilst I have not made an individual assessment of each fish species for which total allowable catches were agreed I would regard the outcome as successful particularly for Irish Sea cod and during the negotiations I was most grateful for the support of my Ministerial Colleagues from England and Scotland and from the Republic of Ireland. However, at the end of the day the need to conserve fish stocks has to be balanced with the need to protect the industry and during these negotiations I was determined to achieve that balance.

Turning to assistance for the industry, I have already introduced a £5 million fishing vessel decommissioning scheme, the results of which have recently been made known. In addition I have recently announced the availability of some £15 million to fund four new schemes to assist the local industry. These are the improvement of facilities at Northern Ireland fishing ports; support for aquaculture; processing and marketing of freshwater and marine products; and promotion of fishery products. I would also hope in the not too distant future to announce further assistance schemes including those on safety training and for improvement in the quality and marketability of fish on board fishing vessels.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease: Compensation

Mr Leslie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the valuation basis used in determining compensation for sheep slaughtered as

a result of the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in south Armagh and the Glens of Antrim. (AQO 622/01)

Ms Rodgers: Part II of Schedule 2 to the Diseases of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 provides for payment of compensation for animals slaughtered because of foot-and-mouth disease.

Under Part 1 of Schedule 2 to the Diseases of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 where an animal slaughtered was affected with foot-and-mouth disease the compensation payable shall be the value of the animal immediately before it became affected. In every other case compensation shall be the value of the animal immediately before it was slaughtered.

Valuation is determined between the owner of the animal and a Department valuation officer. If they fail to agree a valuation the owner has recourse to independent valuation.

Forestry Strategy

Mr A Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she expects to publish her new forestry strategy; and to make a statement.

(AQO 636/01)

Ms Rodgers: I intend to publish a consultation paper before the summer of 2002. The paper will seek comment on those issues where forestry can make a contribution to the economic, social and environmental development of Northern Ireland, within the limits of what we can afford.

Vision Report

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has made representations to the Minister of the Environment to remove rural planning hurdles which might hinder development projects emanating from the 'vision' strategy document.

(AQO 608/01)

Ms Rodgers: The vision report covers a lot of ground and has a large number of Recommendations. I do not wish to comment on specific issues until I have completed my assessment of the report as a whole and had an opportunity to consider the views of all stakeholders. The consultation period has been extended to 31 January 2002. However, I can say that, where appropriate, I will consult with my Executive Colleagues on aspects of the plan relevant to their responsibilities.

Animal Health Issues

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment she has made in

respect of animal health issues, of farmlands being used by security forces and protest groups.

(AQO 601/01)

Ms Rodgers: Our assessment of the risk of disease spread from the security forces and protest groups entering farmland suggests that this is relatively low compared to other forms of transmission. While it is theoretically possible for people to transmit disease it is much more likely that disease is spread by direct contact between animals or by movement of infected material by wildlife. The primary means of infection for the two major diseases, tuberculosis and brucellosis, are inhalation in the case of tuberculosis and direct contamination with the fluids surrounding aborted foetuses and afterbirths of infected cows or heifers in the case of brucellosis. My Department has a code of practice for preventing the introduction or spread of animal and poultry disease. While the guidelines set out in the code are designed primarily for Department officials visiting farms or crossing agricultural land they have been made available to the security forces.

IT Equipment

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made to provide assistance to farmers in order to avail themselves of IT equipment.

(AQO 628/01)

Ms Rodgers: Effective use of the new technology depends not only on farmers having access to the equipment but also on developing the skills to use the equipment and having readily available the applications and software of relevance to their business. My Department has been active in all these areas.

We have, for example, been able to assist some farmers obtain funds from LEDU and through various rural development initiatives to purchase computers for use in the farm business.

I have also provided, using Agenda for Government funding, open access computers for farmers at the three DARD Colleges and at up to 30 locations throughout the Province. The locations were specified by UFU and NIAPA. This provides access to computers and the internet for those farmers who do not have suitable IT equipment on the home farm.

DARD Colleges provide a range of courses for farmers and farm families in the use of computers and Greenmount College has developed a substantial and innovative internet site. This pioneering work forms the basis of the rural portal (www.ruralni.gov.uk) which I launched last week.

This work will continue to support the industry in making effective use of this new technology.

Animal Health Issues

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline if there is a need for those entering farmland to adhere to DARD disease control regulations to avoid the spread of bovine notifiable diseases. [R] (AQO 599/01)

Ms Rodgers: Our assessment of the risk of disease spread from the security forces and protest groups entering farmland suggests that this is relatively low compared to other forms of transmission. While it is theoretically possible for people to transmit disease it is much more likely that disease is spread by direct contact between animals or by movement of infected material by wildlife. The primary means of infection for the two major diseases, tuberculosis and brucellosis, are inhalation in the case of tuberculosis and direct contamination with the fluids surrounding aborted foetuses and afterbirths of infected cows or heifers in the case of brucellosis. My Department has a code of practice for preventing the introduction or spread of animal and poultry disease. While the guidelines set out in the code are designed primarily for Department officials visiting farms or crossing agricultural land they have been made available to the security forces.

Countryside Management and Organic Farming Scheme

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on the uptake of the countryside management and organic farming schemes. (AQO 630/01)

Ms Rodgers: The countryside management scheme came into effect on 20 March 2001. Since then 341 applicants have entered into management agreements with the Department, a further 130 applicants have been offered management agreements in December 2001 and DARD expects to offer agreements to a further 700 applicants in the next few months. Under the terms of the scheme, first payments are made following completion of each year's undertakings. It is also intended that the countryside management scheme will re-open to new applications later in 2002 and annually thereafter.

The organic farming scheme came into effect on 1 March 2001. There are 72 scheme participants, which is only half the number anticipated by this stage. This is due mainly to the effects of the foot-and-mouth disease situation, which meant that necessary on-farm inspections by organic sector bodies could not take place. However we anticipate increased interest in the scheme in 2002.

Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme

Mr Davis asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to consult with

her colleague in Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in respect of a potential application to build a potato chip production plant in Northern Ireland, and to outline if such a plant would attract grant aid.

(AQO 635/01)

Ms Rodgers: When the new processing and marketing grant scheme opens my Department will call for applications. At that stage we will work closely with Department of Trade and Industry agencies, IBD and LEDU who are co-funders of worthy projects. I can not indicate approval of the potential project the Member has outlined until a detailed application has been received and fully assessed.

Overpayments of Compensation

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if Northern Ireland falls within the scope of any investigations being carried out by the European Union anti-fraud unit in respect of alleged overpayments of compensation to farmers whose herds suffered foot-and-mouth disease. (AQO 618/01)

Ms Rodgers: There were no overpayments of compensation for animals slaughtered because of the disease. Animals were individually valued by the Department's valuation officers and owners signed Statements of Valuation agreeing to the valuations of their animals. Following valuation animals were kept under supervision until they were slaughtered, thus there was no possibility that animals could be removed from owners' premises following valuation.

However an inspection team from the European Veterinary Fund Audit office recently visited Northern Ireland, as part of their audit of the UK's claim to the EU for a financial contribution towards the cost of compensation paid for animals slaughtered because of foot-and-mouth disease. The audit team's report has not yet been received.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

50-Metre Swimming Pool: University of Ulster, Jordanstown

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQO 449/01, what practical steps is he taking to ensure that a 50-metre swimming pool will be a central part of the Centre of Excellence at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown; and to make a statement. (AQW 1232/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I refer the Member to the answer I gave

on AQW 1259/01 which confirmed that current plans are to provide a 50 metre swimming pool at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown as part of the Sports Institute for Northern Ireland.

Public Libraries Expenditure

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 1091/01, to give a breakdown of monies spent by the South Eastern Education and Library Board for public libraries under their control, in each of the past five years. (AQW 1305/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The following table gives a breakdown of expenditure by the South Eastern Education and Library Board on the public libraries under its control over the last five years.

Year	Staff and Premises	Books and Materials	Other supplies And Services	Gross Expenditure	Net Expenditure	Capital Expenditure	Total
96/97	£2,829,108	£574,846	£599,997	£4,003,951	£3,822,151	£ 91,793	£3,913,944
97/98	£2,880,726	£329,377	£397,747	£3,607,852	£3,483,272	£210,134	£3,693,406
98/99	£3,258,691	£718,590	£544,445	£4,521,726	£4,380,371	£139,623	£4,519,994
99/2000	£3,179,333	£563,397	£427,789	£4,170,519	£4,027,312	£471,368	£4,498,680*
2000/01	£3,419,144	£613,565	£406,278	£4,438,987	£4,264,317	£ 72,000	£4,336,317

*The total figure for 1999/00 is less than shown in the response to AQW 1091 as the Board has submitted a revised figure.

Development of Youth Football

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (a) any plans he has to provide resources for the development of youth football; and (b) how he intends to allocate these resources. (AQW 1312/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I recently obtained £1.6 million over the next three years from the Executive Programme Funds to assist in the development of youth football in Northern Ireland. It is my intention that this money should be distributed to football through the Sports Council. The Sports Council is therefore drawing up plans for the allocation of this funding at the moment and I anticipate that the Sports Council's plan will be finalised within the next few weeks.

1912 Ulster Covenant

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if his Department or any of its agencies retains a list of names of the people who signed the Ulster Covenant in 1912. (AQW 1336/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) holds the original signatures of the Ulster Covenant. They are set out on approximately 47,150 forms (usually 10 names to each form) within

the Ulster Unionist Council archive (PRONI Ref D/1327). There is no separate list of the signatures.

1912 Ulster Covenant

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the documents that his Department possesses in relation to the 1912 Ulster Covenant. (AQW 1337/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The documents in relation to the 1912 Ulster Covenant are held by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. The main archive is the Ulster Unionist Council archive D/1327. There is also relevant information in the following papers:

- The Northern Ireland Information Service archive (INF/7A)
- Abercorn (D/623)
- Carson (MIC/665)
- Craigavon (D/1415)
- Joseph Cunningham (D/1288)
- H Mongtomery Hyde (D/3084)
- 7th Marquess of Londonderry (D/3099)
- Sir Robert Lynn, MP (D/3480/59)
- Ellison Macartney (D/3649)
- Joshua Peel (D/889)
- Colonel Saunderson (MIC/281, T/2996)
- Ulster Women's Unionist Council (D/2688, D/1098)

Ulster Cycling Federation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money was allocated to the Ulster Cycling Federation in each of the last three years. (AQW 1339/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council recognise the Ulster Cycling Federation (UCF) as the governing body for the sport of cycling in the province. The UCF have had the following funding allocated in the last three years.

	98/99 £	99/00 £	00/01 £
Exchequer	5,000	5,000	5,000
Lottery (Major Home Events)	0	0	1,000

The Northern Ireland Cycling Federation, as an unrecognised governing body, do not qualify for Sports Council Exchequer funding support, although they are eligible to apply for Sports Lottery assistance.

Northern Ireland Cycling Federation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money was allocated to the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation in each of the last three years. (AQW 1340/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council recognise the Ulster Cycling Federation (UCF) as the governing body for the sport of cycling in the province. The UCF have had the following funding allocated in the last three years.

	98/99 £	99/00 £	00/01 £
Exchequer	5,000	5,000	5,000
Lottery (Major Home Events)	0	0	1,000

The Northern Ireland Cycling Federation, as an unrecognised governing body, do not qualify for Sports Council Exchequer funding support, although they are eligible to apply for Sports Lottery assistance.

Bag Limit for Salmon

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has any proposals to introduce a two-bag limit for salmon within inland waterways, in particular, the Lough Neagh and Upper Bann system. (AQW 1354/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I can confirm that approval has been given to a proposal by the Fisheries Conservancy Board to introduce a two fish daily bag limit for rod caught salmon within the board's area, which includes Lough Neagh and the Upper Bann system. The bag limit will apply from 1 June to the end of the annual fishing season. During the period from 1 March to 31 May all salmon caught must be returned immediately to the water. The by-laws will come into operation on 1 March 2002.

Inland Fisheries: Carrickfergus Borough

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to enhance inland fishing in the Carrickfergus Borough Council Area. (AQW 1383/01)

Mr McGimpsey: There are limited opportunities to enhance inland fisheries in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area due to the lack of rivers and loughs. However the Department has four waters in the area which form part of the public angling estate and plans have been drawn up to improve and further develop waters such as Lough Mourne, the Woodburn Reservoirs and the Marshallstown Reservoir. Furthermore consideration is being given to other sources of funding such as the Executive Programme funds.

Regardless of the above, routine maintenance and improvement work is constantly ongoing in the public angling estate and the Department has recently constructed a disabled anglers car park at Middle South Woodburn reservoir. Moreover some work has already begun, in co-operation with the Water Service, to provide extensive disabled facilities at Marshallstown; Upper, Lower and Middle, South and North Woodburn. This will include access and fishing stands for the disabled as well as some tree planting and a new car park at North Woodburn, which should improve road safety and vehicle security.

Sports and Recreational Facilities

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to provide funding to district councils for the development of sports and recreational facilities; and to make a statement. (AQO 596/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The responsibility for securing adequate facilities for social, physical and cultural activities, under Article 10 of the Recreation and Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, lies with district councils.

In addition, statutory responsibility for the development of sport rests with the Sports Council for Northern Ireland. To date the Sports Council has made a sum of approximately £44.9 million available from the Sports Lottery Fund to capital projects, of which £9.8 million has been awarded to district councils.

My Department is, through the cultural forum, working with district councils to assist them with the development of local cultural strategic plans. These plans will be used to assist access to funding sources including that available under the Peace II programme.

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what advice or instructions he has given to each Government Department to promote the use of the Irish language in public life. (AQO 607/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department advised Ministerial Colleagues of the provisions of Part III of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages which the devolved administration could apply to Irish. The Department chairs an interdepartmental group which is developing advice on implementing the Charter. On 6 July 2001 my Department issued to Departments model interim guidance on the use of Irish in official business. This was intended to help Departments understand and meet the minimum requirements of Part III Article 10 of the European Charter. Further draft model guidance will be submitted to the Executive early this year. Furthermore, my Department responds as appropriate to requests from other Departments for advice on specific issues and regularly contributes to consultative exercises.

EDUCATION

O'Neill Memorial Primary School, Crossnacreevy

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the date of the last inspection carried out at O'Neill Memorial Primary School, Crossnacreevy; (b) the date of the last parents' meeting; and (c) if the possible closure of the school was recorded on the agenda for the last parents' meeting. (AQW 1289/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The South-Eastern Education and Library Board has confirmed:

- The date of the last inspection was May 1996;
- The date of the last parents' meeting was 28 November 2001; and
- The South-Eastern Education and Library Board's area strategic development plan, which indicates that there will be a review of primary provision, was an item on the agenda for the meeting on 28 November 2001.

Education Psychologists: Waiting Times

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to provide the current waiting times for appointments with education psychologists in each education and library board. (AQW 1304/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The position on referrals for statutory assessment of special educational needs at Stage 4 of the code of practice in each education and library board area is as follows: -

Belfast	89.5% assessed within six weeks
Western	90% assessed within six weeks
North Eastern	average time is 41 days
South Eastern	95% assessed within six weeks
Southern	92% assessed within six weeks

Average waiting times at Stage 3 of the code of practice are not available.

O'Neill Memorial Primary School

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) if the chairman of the board of governors of O'Neill Memorial Primary School has received any requests, since 1 December 2001, for an Extraordinary General Meeting of Parents with the Governors; (b) the decision reached; and (c) the reason for this decision. (AQW 1306/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The South-Eastern Education and Library Board have confirmed:

- The chairperson of the board of governors received a letter posted on 14 December 2001 from a group of concerned parents requesting an emergency meeting of the board of governors; and
- and (c) The chairperson responded on 15 December 2001 indicating that because of the Christmas holidays it would not be possible to hold a meeting until the new year. The parents were asked to write to the secretary to the board of governors suggesting suitable dates for a meeting.

O'Neill Memorial Primary School, Crossnacreevy

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Education to list (a) the parent governors of O'Neill Memorial Primary School, Crossnacreevy, at the beginning of the academic year September 2001; and (b) the number of children each parent governor has enrolled at the school. (AQW 1307/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The South-Eastern Education and Library Board have confirmed:

- The parent governors at September 2001 were Mrs Valerie Atcheson and Mr Desmond Butler; and
- These individuals did not have children at the school in September 2001, but did so at the time of their election as parent governors.

O'Neill Primary School, Crossnacreevy

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) those parent governors of O'Neill Primary

School, Crossnacreevy, at January 2002, and were they appointed at a parents' meeting; (b) the date of the parents' meeting; (c) if all the parents were invited to this meeting; and (d) the number of children each of these parent governors have enrolled at the school.

(AQW 1308/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The South-Eastern Education and Library Board have confirmed:

- (a) At January 2002 there were 2 vacancies for parent governors at the school due to the withdrawal of the parent governors elected to serve for the period 2001-2005. The school is in the process of arranging a new election;
- (b) The governors who have withdrawn were elected at the meeting held on 29 October 2001;
- (c) All parent were invited to this meeting; and
- (d) As parent elections are currently pending details are not known.

Student Teachers: Mathematics

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) the number of student teachers currently training that will have mathematics as their main subject area; and (b) if he is considering increasing these numbers to meet any potential shortfall.

(AQW 1332/01)

Mr M McGuinness: There are currently 105 student teachers training with mathematics as their main subject. My Department adjusts the overall allocation of teacher training places annually to ensure a reasonable match between the numbers being trained and projected teacher vacancies based on a statistical model. Each higher education institution is then responsible for distributing its total allocation of places across its own course provision.

Mathematics Teachers: Vacancies

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what assessment he has made in relation to the number of suitable mathematics teachers available currently for posts advertised for secondary level schools; and to make a statement.

(AQW 1334/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department does not collect information from the employing authorities about the number of applications to fill teaching vacancies in schools; and the employing authorities have not reported to my Department that they are experiencing serious problems in recruiting mathematics teachers to secondary schools.

Classroom Assistants

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of classroom assistants currently employed in primary schools in each education and library board area.

(AQW 1352/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I have been advised by the education and library boards that the numbers are as follows:

BELB	231
WELB	670
NEELB	569
SEELB	579
SELB	860

Maintenance Work

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to list the schools awaiting high priority maintenance work in the constituency of North Down; and the proposed dates for the commencement of this work.

(AQW 1385/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Responsibility for maintenance of controlled and maintained schools in the constituency rests with the South-Eastern Education and Library Board. I understand from the board that it plans to commence high priority maintenance work at the schools listed below over the next two years. The Department has no information on planned maintenance work at other schools in the constituency.

2002/03 Financial Year
Ballyholme Primary School, Bangor
Ballyvester Primary School, Bangor
Bangor Nursery School
Bloomfield Primary School, Bangor
Clandeboy Primary School, Bangor
Conlig Primary School
Donaghadee Primary School
Donaghadee High School
Grange Park Primary School, Bangor
Hollywood Central Meals Kitchen
Kilcooley Primary School, Bangor
Kilmaine Primary School, Bangor
Priory College, Hollywood
Rathmore Primary School, Bangor
St Columbanus College, Bangor
St Finian's Primary School, Newtownards
St Malachy's Primary School, Bangor
St Patrick's Primary School, Hollywood

Towerview Primary School, Bangor
Trinity Nursery School, Bangor
2003/04 Financial Year
Ballyholme Primary School, Bangor
Clandeboy Primary School, Bangor
Glencraig Primary School
Kilcooley Primary School, Bangor
Kilmaine Primary School, Bangor
Redburn Primary School, Holywood
St Columbanus College, Bangor
St Malachy's Primary School, Bangor

Average Class Size

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail, by education authority, the average class size in secondary schools in each year since 1994.

(AQW 1449/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The information requested is not held by the Department, and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Classroom Assistants: Qualifications or Experience

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education what qualifications or experience classroom assistants require before entering the classroom environment.

(AQW 1456/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I have been advised that while there are a number of qualifications that offer qualified status to classroom assistants, the minimum qualification offering recognised status by the education and library boards to classroom assistants in all schools is a NVQ Level II in Early Years Care and Education.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

UCAS

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she will consider providing Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) with the facility to collect data on the religious background of their Northern Ireland applicants. (AQW 1323/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): This matter has been discussed with UCAS. As an admissions organisation for institutions across the United Kingdom they are unwilling to treat

applicants from Northern Ireland in a different way from those of the other jurisdictions.

Community Relations Programmes

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans she has to promote community relations programmes in teacher education and further and higher education. (AQW 1325/01)

Ms Hanna: The promotion of community relations programmes in teacher education is the responsibility of the Department of Education.

A working group set up by my Department is to produce recommendations on the promotion of community relations within the FE curriculum. It is also expected to produce a good practice guide for colleges.

The NI universities are autonomous bodies with a statutory obligation, under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, to promote equality of opportunity and good community relations. My Department has set aside additional funding of £155,000 in 2001-02 to assist the universities in meeting these statutory obligations.

Complaints: Labour Relations Agency

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the number of complaints, post devolution, that have reached tribunal stage and have been referred to the Labour Relations Agency in respect of cases taken against directors of further education colleges on the grounds of bullying, abusive behaviour and discriminatory employment practices; and (b) what measures she intends to put in place to address such matters. (AQW 1327/01)

Ms Hanna: Governing bodies, and employees do not, as a matter of course, advise the Department of cases that have been referred to tribunals or the Labour Relations Agency. The Department has however been made aware of two cases, since 1999, where complaints have been made against directors of colleges and which have been referred to the Labour Relations Agency. Staffing and employee relations matters are issues for the governing body of colleges of further and higher education. There exists already internal and external procedures, including employment law, for dealing with such matters.

Training and Employment Agency: Accounts

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when does the Training and Employment agency intend to lay its accounts before the Assembly for the year 1999-2000; and to make a statement.

(AQW 1412/01)

Ms Hanna: The Training and Employment Agency's final set of accounts for 1999-2000 were passed in draft form to the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) in September 2000. The NIAO questioned the technical accounting policy used in those accounts in relation to the timing of the recognition of income from European Union claims. After extended discussions, an alternative approach has been accepted. I hope that the necessary information will be available within about a month to enable the accounts to be redrafted and passed to NIAO. They will then be laid as soon as NIAO have completed its report.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Halifax Call Centre (Gasworks Site)

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the percentage of employees at the Halifax Call Centre (Gasworks site) who reside in each Belfast post code area. (AQW 1281/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The information requested is gathered on new investment projects in order to assess the extent to which actual jobs created have had an impact in New TSN areas. The information is gathered on a voluntary basis from companies promoting these projects on the understanding that it will not be used to identify individual companies unless the companies are content to release the data, currently DETI does not have the information requested. It is the intention of the Department that figures relating to job creation in New TSN areas will be published after the financial year end.

Petroleum Licence Applications

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, by constituency, the number of applications received for petroleum licenses in each of the last three years. (AQW 1380/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The details are as follows:

Year	No of applications received	Constituency
2001	1	Licence area falls mostly in East Antrim but includes parts of North Antrim and South Antrim
2000	0	N/A
1999	0	N/A

Tourism Potential: Carrickfergus Borough Council Area

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to set up a cross-departmental committee

to harness the tourism potential of the inland fishing and forest walks within the Carrickfergus Borough Council area. (AQW 1391/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In 1999 the Northern Ireland Tourist Board established national product marketing groups for the Northern Ireland angling and walking products. Each group is comprised of representatives from regional tourism organisations, local authorities, government agencies and advisory bodies, Sustrans and the Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN). A partnership approach is adopted by the product marketing groups to develop and fulfil an annual marketing activities plan and highlight areas for further product development.

Carrickfergus Borough Council is already represented on each group through the Causeway coast and glens regional tourism organisation. In the circumstances, I do not feel a further cross-departmental committee to harness the tourism potential of the inland fishing and forest walks within the Carrickfergus Borough Council area would be appropriate.

Bombardier

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assurances he received from Bombardier with reference to the retention of design staff in Belfast. (AQW 1400/01)

Sir Reg Empey: I have had frequent meetings and discussions with Bombardier, including my recent visit to Bombardier Headquarters in Montreal. I have received assurances from Bombardier that it is committed to retaining a strong design, engineering and manufacturing capability in Belfast, which will enable it to respond effectively to future business opportunities.

Bangor Job Centre Area: Redundancies

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of redundancies in the Bangor job centre area in the last year. (AQW 1510/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Over the year to 18 January 2002, there were 4,848 redundancies in Northern Ireland confirmed to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Of these, 19 were in the Bangor job centre area.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Applications

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what percentage of planning applications made

since 1996 were approved in each of the following sectors (a) large scale retail development; (b) new housing development; and (c) hotel complexes.

(AQW 1248/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster):

The details are set out below:

Percentage of applications approved

- Large scale retail developments 59%
- Housing development 67%
- Hotel complexes 70%

The figure for new housing development excludes applications for single houses.

The figure for hotel complexes includes applications received for restaurants and public houses.

Statutory Service Providers

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 866/01 and AQW 867/01, to detail (a) how water and electricity supplies are to be provided to the properties in the development and (b) any precedent that would support an unorthodox method, should one be adopted, of providing water and electricity in this case. (AQW 1257/01)

Mr Foster: It is a matter for statutory service providers to determine how they provide their services. However, my Department has written to the agents acting for the developer in this case, imposing a number of conditions under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. These have been imposed to protect the badgers near this site, and include a condition that no services are to be placed underground within the “no development” zone.

Moratorium on Planning Applications for Telecommunication Masts

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of the Environment to impose a moratorium on all planning applications for telecommunication masts until such time as all health concerns have been fully assessed.

(AQW 1261/01)

Mr Foster: It would not be practical, or indeed lawful, for me to impose a moratorium on planning applications for telecommunication masts, as my Department has a statutory duty to process and determine any valid planning application which it receives. Accordingly once all material planning information relating to an application for a telecommunications mast has been received and fully considered, including consultation replies together with any other representations received, my Department is under a legal obligation to determine that application.

The member may also be aware that Article 33 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 provides an applicant, in all but major cases designated under Article 31 of that Order, with the right to appeal to the Planning Appeals Commission on the grounds that his or her application has not been determined by my Department within laid down timescales.

Any objections relating to health issues or other public concerns raised in representations on planning proposals are fully considered by Planning Service in processing applications. Where appropriate advice on health matters is sought from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. As regards proposals for telecommunications masts, the most recent advice available from the DHSSPS has advised that, where emissions from the mast are within the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) public exposure guidelines, they would not raise any further questions with regard to health. It is in the context of this current advice from DHSSPS that Planning Service considers health concerns raised about such development.

Planning Applications: Telecommunication Masts

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of the Environment to make it his policy that any future planning applications for telecommunication masts will only be granted where they are at least 1,000 metres from private/public dwellings. (AQW 1262/01)

Mr Foster: My Department issued a consultation paper on 10 November 2000, seeking views on possible changes to planning legislation for the control of development by licensed telecommunications code system operators, and on the terms of a draft planning policy statement on telecommunications development.

Following a decision of the Executive Committee, I intend to shortly bring forward legislation, which will require full planning permission for all new telecommunications development. All new mast development will then be subject to the full rigour of the planning process. At the same time my Department is revising the draft planning policy statement on telecommunications development taking advice, on health issues, from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. As part of that revision, my Department is considering the issues raised by the Member. I will, of course, advise the Member of the outcome of that process.

Telecommunication Masts: Emissions

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to ensure that emissions from telecommunication masts do not exceed the legal limits. (AQW 1263/01)

Mr Foster: My Department has no responsibility for monitoring or control of emissions from telecommunications base stations. Responsibility for the regulation of telecommunications in the United Kingdom rests with the Department of Trade and Industry. Operators of public telecommunications systems require a licence issued by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry under the Telecommunications Act 1984.

The Stewart Report on mobile phones and health in May 2000 recommended the adoption, as a precautionary approach, of the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) public exposure guidelines in lieu of the guidelines of the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB).

The Report also recommended that an independent random audit of telecommunications base stations should be carried out to give the public confidence that emissions to which the public are exposed do not exceed the ICNIRP guidelines. Surveys are currently being undertaken by the Radiocommunications Agency (RA), an Agency of the DTI. The initial focus of the audit is schools with base stations on their premises. 100 surveys have been completed up to December 2001, including 6 school sites in Northern Ireland, with all measurements so far showing emissions to be hundreds of times below the ICNIRP public exposure guidelines. The full results are published on the RA website at (www.radio.gov.uk).

Green Belts

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment has been made in relation to the effect of green belts on the development opportunities of local district councils such as the creation of new community and leisure facilities. (AQW 1291/01)

Mr Foster: My Department has not carried out any specific assessment of the effects of green belts on the development opportunities of local councils. Specific applications would be assessed against prevailing planning policies contained in the planning strategy for rural NI and planning policy statements and against the content of the relevant area plan. However, the development plan preparation process offers councils the opportunity to make representations covering the extent of green belt which may be relevant to any development matters causing concern.

Telecommunications Mast: School Road, Crogarry, Newry

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQO 2/01, what progress has been made in relation to the removal of the telecommunications mast at School Road, Crogarry, Newry. (AQW 1315/01)

Mr Foster: I have little to add to my answer to AQO2/01 when I explained that Crown Castle, agents for One 2 One, had intended to replace the mast with two smaller roadside masts. This is still their position.

Crown Castle wrote to me on 19 December 2001 advising that they were consulting widely on the sites identified. In addition to writing to the local council with details of their proposals, they advised that they had sent mail shots to all those parties believed to have an interest in this matter. They further advised that they were at the initial stages of consultation and were not yet in a position to submit planning applications. In responding to that letter, my private secretary stated that I was anxious to ensure that this matter is satisfactorily resolved with the minimum of further delay, and added that I trusted they would be in a position to submit the relevant applications as soon as possible.

No applications have been received to date, but we will continue to press Crown Castle for a satisfactory resolution of this matter.

Multiple Occupancy Dwellings: Portstewart/Portrush

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the measures he uses to ensure that the number of multiple occupancy dwellings do not exceed the number of private occupancy dwellings within new housing developments in Portstewart and Portrush. (AQW 1342/01)

Mr Foster: Under the provisions of the Planning (Use Classes) Order (NI) 1989, a dwelling house may be occupied by not more than six residents living together on a communal basis, as a single household, without the requirement to seek planning permission for a change of use from a dwelling previously occupied by a single person, or by people living together as a family.

Similarly a new dwelling can be designed to accommodate up to six residents living together on a communal basis as a single household without a requirement for the developer to specifically distinguish it as a proposed house in multiple occupation. The Regulations do not provide my Department with any powers to specify how the dwelling might subsequently be occupied, at the time an original planning application is determined.

As a consequence, there are no measures available to ensure that dwellings in multiple occupation do not exceed the number of privately occupied dwellings.

Bulk Buying of Housing for Student Accommodation

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to limit bulk buying of houses for

student occupation in areas of new residential development. (AQW 1343/01)

Mr Foster: I have no powers to limit the bulk buying of housing for student accommodation. However, any proposals to provide accommodation for multiple occupancy are bound by the provisions of the Planning (Use Classes) Order (NI) 1991, which states that a dwelling house may be occupied by not more than six residents living together on a communal basis, as a single household, without the requirement to seek planning permission for a change of use from a dwelling previously occupied by a single person, or by people living together as a family.

Houses Built in Portstewart

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the number of new houses built in Portstewart in the last five years; and (b) the number of these houses currently owner-occupied.

(AQW 1344/01)

Mr Foster: Records held on housing completions in Portstewart are available for the last four years 1997-98, 1998-99, 1999-2000 and 2000-01. These show that there were 421 housing completions during that period.

My Department does not hold information on houses which are owner occupied.

Houses Built in Portstewart

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of houses built in Portstewart without initial planning permission, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1345/01)

Mr Foster: My Department does not keep a record of this information.

Planning Permissions Granted

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning permissions granted retrospectively in 2001. (AQW 1361/01)

Mr Foster: The information requested is not readily available, and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost to my Department.

Ballylumford Power Station

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the monitoring process for emissions at Premier Power Ltd, Ballylumford, Islandmagee; and (b) if any regulations have been breached in each of the last three years. (AQW 1362/01)

Mr Foster: Ballylumford Power Station which operates on natural gas, with heavy fuel oil as a standby fuel, is authorised under the Industrial Pollution Control (NI) Order 1997.

The authorisation requires the company continuously to monitor emissions to the atmosphere of sulphur dioxide, oxides of nitrogen, carbon monoxide and smoke and manually to test the emissions from each boiler, on an annual basis, using an accredited testing laboratory.

The company is also required to monitor its discharges to Larne Lough for key parameters, such as temperature, pH, total residual oxidant, oil/grease and ferrous sulphate, on a four-hourly, daily or monthly basis depending on the parameter.

The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) regularly inspects the plant and arranges for check monitoring of the emissions to air and water.

Copies of the authorisation and monitoring reports are placed on public registers, which are located in Larne Borough Council offices and in the EHS Office in Calvert House, Belfast.

Over the last three years, the company has complied with all of the authorised limits, except for three breaches of the particulate-to-air limit and a few periods of dark smoke emission. The first particulate breach was recorded in March 2000 and the other two occurred during October 2001. The intermittent episodes of dark smoke emission occurred during 1 to 4 January 2002 when there was an interruption of the gas supply to the station and the company was required to switch over to heavy fuel oil. When the plant was returned to gas firing, the problem disappeared. The particulate exceedences were very minor and did not result in any off-site complaint nor any reported adverse impact on the environment.

On each occasion, EHS was informed by the company of the reasons for the release and the steps taken to alleviate the problem.

Multiple Student Occupancy

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment what action he intends to take to sustain and enhance local communities that are experiencing a high density of multiple student occupancy, in particular, towns neighbouring the University of Ulster, Coleraine. (AQW 1365/01)

Mr Foster: There are no provisions within planning law to enable my Department to control who occupies particular properties and there is no basis in planning law or policies for distinguishing between students and other sections of the community. Providing that the use to which the property is put meets with legal require-

ments and the provisions of current planning policy, there are no actions that my Department can take.

I understand the Member's concern about the impact of student accommodation on a community, and on the character of specific areas around the north coast, and within the catchment area of the University. However, there are limitations on the ability of the land use planning system to regulate the growth of houses in multiple occupation, that do not exceed the threshold specified in the Planning (Use Classes) Order (NI) 1989. Where houses in multiple occupancy require planning permission my Department seeks to ensure the protection of residential amenity in its consideration of planning applications.

Multiple Student Occupancy: Current House Prices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment he has made in the relationship between areas with multiple student occupancy and current house prices. (AQW 1366/01)

Mr Foster: I have made no assessment of this matter. However, the area plan preparation process, particularly with the new "Issues Paper" approach, will allow planning issues related to multiple occupancy of properties to be raised and discussed.

Multiple Occupancy

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment if there is an optimum percentage of dwellings of multiple occupancy that can be accommodated by an existing community. (AQW 1367/01)

Mr Foster: My Department is not aware of any such figure. While many houses in multiple occupation fall outside the scope of existing planning regulations contained within the Planning (Use Classes) Order (NI) 1989, and do not require planning consent, where they do, my Department's prime consideration in processing planning applications is the potential impact on the amenities of an area. In reaching a planning decision, my Department's aim is to ensure the protection of residential amenity and the provision of a suitable standard of accommodation.

Waste Management

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment what financial assistance is available to local councils to help them achieve their waste recycling targets. (AQW 1376/01)

Mr Foster: My Department's remaining budget for waste management in the current financial year is £2.5 million.

I have recently approved a waste management grant scheme which will disburse £2 million of this budget to Councils in the current financial year. A copy of the scheme was sent to all councils on 14 January 2002.

The scheme provides funding for activities, including recycling, which will help councils meet the objectives and targets in the NI waste management strategy and in councils' developing waste management plans. The amount to be allocated for recycling is a matter for the Councils themselves, in line with their draft waste management plans and the terms of the scheme. The allocation in my Department's budget for 2002-03 is £7.4 million. No decisions have yet been taken on how much of this will be available to councils. This will depend on progress in finalising their waste management plans. Again the amount available to support recycling within any allocation will be a matter for the Councils themselves.

The remaining £0.5 million of this year's budget is being used by my Department for further waste data surveys, on public awareness and education on waste issues and on extending the GB Waste to Resources action programme to Northern Ireland.

World Summit on Sustainable Development

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the forthcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development and on Northern Ireland participation in the Cabinet Committee dealing with the Summit. (AQW 1388/01)

Mr Foster: The World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 (WSSD) will mark the 10th anniversary of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio.

The Whitehall Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is leading the UK preparations for the Summit.

The agenda for WSSD has not yet been formally agreed, but is evolving through the international preparatory process. UK priorities for the summit are eradicating poverty by making globalisation work for sustainable development, freshwater and oceans, access to clean energy, sustainable development initiatives for Africa, resource productivity/efficiency worldwide (including the use of scientific and technological knowledge) and capacity building as a cross cutting issue.

Northern Ireland is undertaking a number of activities in the run-up to WSSD, including a conference in September 2001, a Green Living Fair and the 'Our World Project', which I launched, in partnership with the Worldwide Fund for Nature, in September 2001. This project involves schools in Northern Ireland competing for a grant of £15,000 to help make their

school more sustainable. In addition, an Earth Champion, selected from the winning school, will play an active role at the Summit.

The new Cabinet Committee on WSSD [MISC 18], chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, is co-ordinating the UK's strategy for the Summit. The Environment Ministers from the three devolved Administrations, have been invited to attend meetings of the Committee. There have been two meetings to date. Unfortunately, because of Executive and Assembly Business, which must take priority for me, I have been unable to attend either. I have therefore written to the Deputy Prime Minister to assure him of my support for the process and I will attend future meetings where possible. Moreover, my Department is represented at meetings of officials supporting the MISC 18 process.

Belfast Regeneration Office: Upper Dunmurry Lane

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment if the Belfast Regeneration office has any plans to sell land, which it considers surplus to use, in the Upper Dunmurry Lane adjoining the Colin Glen Trust for a horticultural college and garden centre.

(AQW 1407/01)

Mr Foster: I can confirm that my Department regards these lands as surplus to its requirements. The Department of Social Development's Belfast Regeneration Office is taking forward the disposal process on behalf of my Department.

As part of this process, and in line with Government procedures, details of the lands have been circulated to other Government Departments, and expressions of interest have been invited. If a compelling case can be made, the lands may be transferred to the appropriate Department. If not, they will be placed on the open market.

While there have been expressions of interest none of these have involved a proposal to develop a horticultural college and garden centre.

Recycling Plastics

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what facilities exist for the recycling of plastics.

(AQW 1414/01)

Mr Foster: There are 15 Northern Ireland companies which recycle or reprocess plastic film and/or dense plastic waste. They are listed in a comprehensive guide to recycling and reprocessing facilities entitled 'Recycling Directory of Ireland'. The Directory identifies alternative paths for plastics waste, which minimise the loss of valuable material to landfill and reduce costs to companies. It is available free of charge to industry,

business and local authorities both in hard copy and via a web-site (www.irelandrecycling.ie).

Recycled Packaging Waste

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what percentage of packaging is currently recycled.
(AQW 1421/01)

Mr Foster: The most up-to-date figures available for the percentage of waste packaging being recycled are for the calendar year 2000 and refer to the UK, as a whole. These indicate that 36% of packaging waste was recycled.

Since the packaging recovery scheme was designed to operate in a seamless way across the UK, it is not possible to separate data individually applicable to England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The Department is commissioning further studies of commercial and industrial waste. These will, among other things, help to clarify what progress is being made in promoting the recycling of packaging waste.

Disposal of Fridges and Freezers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) any meetings which have taken place with local district councils to agree a strategy for the disposal of fridges and freezers; and (b) the timetable for agreeing and implementing this strategy.
(AQW 1422/01)

Mr Foster:

- (a) To date no meetings have taken place with local councils to agree a strategy for the disposal of fridges and freezers as this is dependent on guidance on recovery standards and the subsequent establishment of facilities.
- (b) The short-term strategy is to store waste units until an approved disposal route can be found. Guidance on storage issued to councils last week for consideration. My officials are making arrangements to meet with council representatives to discuss the guidance and other issues relating to storage.

Draft guidance on standards for the recovery of ozone depleting substances from insulating foam has been circulated. It should become clearer over the next three months how the waste management industry intends to respond to these and the needs of councils in terms of the siting of approved disposal plant. It would be appropriate at that stage to commence the formulation of a strategy for disposal of the waste units when decisions could be taken based on more accurate transport and disposal cost information.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment when he expects to complete his programme of designation of areas of special scientific interest. (AQW 1438/01)

Mr Foster: I am not yet able to say when the programme will be completed. My Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) is at present reviewing the network of Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs). EHS hopes to complete this review in the next financial year. In this review, the current and proposed extent of the ASSI network (as well as the subsequent management and monitoring requirements) is being assessed. It is not yet possible to predict the final number of ASSIs nor to estimate when the designations will be completed. The final number is likely to be more than twice the present total of 190 but the average size of the additional sites will be much less than that of the existing ones.

There has been steady progress in the declaration of ASSIs, despite the additional requirement to identify and designate sites under European Directives and other international obligations. The 190 current ASSIs cover about 6% of our land area. There remains a significant number of additional sites which are known to merit designation.

Action to Eradicate Vandalism: Local Government Properties

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what action has been taken or is planned in the future to eradicate vandalism against local government properties. (AQW 1454/01)

Mr Foster: No direct action has been taken by the Department of the Environment to eradicate vandalism of local government properties. This is a matter for district councils, some of which have installed CCTV systems in their areas to address local problems such as vandalism.

Cost of Vandalism: Local Government Properties

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, by district council area, the financial cost of the vandalism of local government buildings over the past five years. (AQW 1455/01)

Mr Foster: The financial cost of the vandalism of local government buildings is not recorded centrally. Expenditure over the past five years could only be determined at disproportionate cost.

Listed Buildings Demolished: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, in each of the last 3 years within North Down,

the number of (a) buildings which have been given the designation "listed"; and (b) "listed" buildings which have been demolished. (AQW 1492/01)

Mr Foster: Within North Down, no buildings have been given the designation "listed", nor has any "listed" Building been demolished, within the last three years.

Bilateral Concordat

Mr B Bell asked the Minister of the Environment if it is his intention to enter into a bilateral concordat with any GB Departments in order to maintain good working relations. (AQW 1569/01)

Mr Foster: I can confirm that my Department has agreed a bilateral concordat with the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR). I believe this will provide a sufficient basis for the continued good working relationship, which already exists between the two Departments, copies of the concordat have been placed in the Assembly Library.

My officials are also involved in discussions with officials from the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) with a view to agreeing a similar concordat with that GB Department.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Land Registers of Northern Ireland: Applications

Mr Leslie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 86/01, to detail (a) the number of applications that are currently outstanding; and (b) the number of applications that have been outstanding for more than one year. (AQW 1272/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): The registry has approximately 26,912 applications for registration awaiting processing. Approximately 17,951 of these applications are overdue in terms of internal target times, which the registry uses to monitor the progress of work (See Note 1 below). Some 7,431 applications are one year old. There are 2,880 applications which have exceeded target times by one year.

Note 1:

The reference to entries has been assumed to relate to applications for registration.

Peace II Programme

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 926/01, how he will meet

the needs of groups who did not apply for gap funding but who are now facing funding difficulties as the applications for Peace II are taking longer than expected.

(AQW 1283/01)

Dr Farren: The Special EU Programmes Body as managing authority for Peace II is working very closely with all implementing bodies across the programme to ensure that all possible steps are being taken to ensure full implementation of the Programme as soon as possible and complete all stages without delay. A full application programme is currently operational and calls for projects have already been made across the majority of the Peace II Programme. Every effort is being made to ensure that Peace II funds are available and flowing to projects on the ground as soon as possible. All applications under the new Peace II Programme will be open to any project/group whether in receipt of gap funding or not and all projects in receipt of gap Funding will be required to make a full application under the programme.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Hospital Cleanliness

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will make a statement on the standards of hospital cleanliness in Western Health and Social Services Board.

(AQW 1077/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): All trusts have a duty to ensure that high standards are being met and maintained. Regular inspections on the standards of hospital cleanliness are carried out by trusts in the western board area.

Tá dualgas ar gach Iontaobhas a chinntiú go bhfuil na caighdeáin is airde á mbaint amach agus á geotheabháil. Déanann na hIontaobhais iniúchtaí rialta ar chaighdeáin ghlaineacht ospidéal i limistéar Bhord an Iarthair.

'The Economist': HPSS Statistics

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will make a statement in respect of statistics reported in 'The Economist' on 27 October 2001, page 43, that is, (a) spending per person on health and personal social services in 1999 to 2000: England £1,041, Scotland £1,271, Wales £1,180 and Northern Ireland £1,193; and (b) percentage of population on hospital waiting lists for 12 months or

more: England 4.2, Scotland 1.3, Wales 13.8 and Northern Ireland 21.8.

(AQW 1214/01)

Ms de Brún: We do not have access to the data upon which the statistics quoted in 'The Economist' are based and I am, therefore, not in a position to comment in detail on them.

The difficulties regarding comparison of health and personal social services expenditure here and in England, Scotland and Wales remain as set out in the answer I gave to the Member in written question 571/01.

In terms of waiting lists there are significant differences in the way that information is collected in the countries quoted. Nonetheless, it is clear that hospital waiting lists here are a major concern, reflecting growing pressures in the health and social services. The underlying problem is one of service capacity, which will require a sustained increase in funding over a number of years to resolve.

Níl rochtain againn ar na sonraí ar a bhfuil na staitisticí san Economist bunaithe agus nílim mar sin ábalta labhairt go mion fúthu.

Tá na deacrachtaí maidir le comparáid idir caiteachas seirbhísí sóisialacha sláinte agus pearsanta anseo, i Sasana, in Albain agus sa Bhreatain Bheag fós mar a leagadh amach sa fhreagra a thug mé don Chomhalta i gCeist Scríofa 571/01.

Maidir le liosta feithimh tá difríochtaí suntasacha sa ts lí a mbailítear eolas sna tíortha atá luaite. Mar sin féin is léir gur ábhar buartha liostaí feithimh ospidéal, a léiriú an brú atá ag méadú sna seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialacha. Is í an fhadhb bhunúsach ná acmhainn seirbhíse a éileoidh méadú inmharthana i maoiniú thar roinnt blianta chun teacht ar réiteach.

Waiting Lists

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the progress of reducing timescales for patients being (a) diagnosed; and (b) treated after diagnosis. (AQW 1215/01)

Ms de Brún: Boards and trusts are implementing a range of measures to improve efficiency in relation to diagnosis, admission to hospital, treatment and discharge. These include the validation of waiting lists, the development of GP referral protocols, the provision of additional hospital inpatient procedures and the piloting of community provision as alternatives to hospital admission. For example:

- in the area of heart disease, immediate action is being taken to improve staffing levels and capacity at the Royal Group of Hospitals, thus facilitating increased numbers of procedures in this key specialty. Extra cardiac surgery procedures are also being commissioned from units elsewhere for a

number of patients who are able and willing to travel. Additional angiography facilities have been opened recently at Altnagelvin Hospital, which will increase overall capacity for this diagnostic testing and help reduce waiting times;

- in cancer services, a two-week outpatient appointments target was introduced last year for people with suspected breast cancer. In radiotherapy, I have recently approved the acquisition of two additional linear accelerators at Belvoir Park Hospital, which should improve waiting time significantly.

Tá Boird agus Iontaobhais ag feidhmiú roinnt bearta chun éifeachtacht maidir le fáthmeas, iontráil chuig ospidéil, cóireáil agus scaoileadh amach a fheabhsú. Áirítear orthu sin bailíochtú ar liostaí feithimh, forbairt prótacail chur ar aghaidh ó dhochtúirí teaghlach, soláthar nósanna imeachta ospidéil d'othair in-ospidéil agus piolótú ar sholáthar pobail mar mhalairt ar iontráil chuig ospidéil. Mar shampla:

- i réimse ghalar croí tá beart láithreach a ghlacadh chun leibhéil foirne a fheabhsú agus chun acmhainn a fheabhsú sa Ghrúpa Ríoga Ospidéal, agus ar an mbealach sin ag cur leis an líon feidhmiúchán sa sainréimse sin. Tá breis feidhmiúchán máinliachta croí coimisiúnaithe ó aonaid in áiteanna eile do roinnt othar atá ábalta agus toilteanach taisteal. Osclaíodh breis saoráidí angioghrafacha le gairid ag Ospidéal Altnagelvin a chuirfidh le acmhainn foriomlán do thástáil fáthmheasa agus a chuideoidh le liostaí feithimh a laghdú.
- i seirbhísí ailse, tugadh sprioc dhá sheachtain coinní d'eis-othair isteach anuraidh do dhaoine a meastar ailse cíche a bheith orthu. Maidir le raiditeiripe cheadaigh mé le gairid sealbhú dhá luasaitheoir líneacha breise ag Ospidéal Pháirc Belvoir, rud a chuideoidh ba chóir go mór le am feithimh a laghdú.

Winter Pressures

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are in place to address the increase in demand for services over the winter months at (a) Whiteabby Hospital; (b) Antrim Hospital; and (c) the Mater Infirmorum Hospital.

(AQW 1233/01)

Ms de Brún: The Northern and Eastern Health and Social Services Boards, which cover the hospitals in question, have detailed plans in place for this winter. These include:

- Whiteabbey Hospital – expansion of intermediate care beds to ten and agreement for extra medical patients to be treated at the Mater Infirmorum Hospital to take pressure off facilities at Whiteabbey; provision of additional staff at Whiteabbey Hospital;

extra community care support provided by Homefirst HSS Trust.

- Antrim Area Hospital – additional ten-bedded Accident and Emergency observation unit, including nursing and support staff. Flexible use of surgical and medical beds according to demand; appointment of bed management staff; two high dependency beds opened in December 2001; extra community care support provided by Homefirst HSS Trust.
- Mater Infirmorum – plans are in place for the provision of an additional twenty medical beds; extra community care support provided by neighbouring community Trusts.

In addition, the Emergency Admissions Co-ordination Centre, which covers all hospitals in the Eastern and Northern Board areas, manages emergency admissions for the hospitals in question.

Tá mionphleananna socraithe ag Boird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialacha an Tuaiscirt agus an Oirthir a chlúdaíonn na hospidéil atá i gceist. Áirítear orthu sin :

- Ospidéal Whiteabbey – leathnú ar leapacha cúraim meáin go deich gcinn agus comhaontú go gcuirfear cóireáil ar bhreis othar liachta ag Ospidéal Infirmorum an Matar chun an brú a bhaint de na saoráidí ag Whiteabbey, soláthar foirne breise ag Ospidéal Whiteabbey; tacaíocht cúraim pobail bhreise arna sholáthar ag Iontaobhas Homefront HSS.
- Ospidéal Limistéar Aontroma- aonad faireacháin deich leaba breise Timpiste agus Éigeandála, lena n-áirítear foireann altránais agus tacaíochta. Úsáid sholúbtha leapacha máinliachta agus liachta de réir éilimh; ceapadh fhoireann bainistíochta leaapacha, dhá leaba ardchleithiúnais oscailte i Nollaig 2001; tacaíocht cúraim pobail breise arna sholáthar ag Iontaobhas Homefirst HSS.
- Infirmorum Mater – tá pleananna socraithe chun fiche leaba breise liachta a chur ar fáil: tacaíocht cúraim pobail breise arna sholáthar ag Iontaobhas Homefirst HSS.

Chomh maith leis sin déanann an tIonad Comhordaithe Iontrálacha Éigeandála a chlúdaíonn ospidéil i limistéir Bhoird an Tuaiscirt agus an Oirthir bainistíocht ar iontrálacha éigeandála do na hospidéil atá i gceist.

Headed Notepaper: Irish Language

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total cost of producing headed notepaper in the Irish language since her appointment.

(AQW 1266/01)

Ms de Brún: Headed notepaper and stationery for the Department incorporates both English and Irish and there is no significant additional cost to the use of

Irish. Since December 1999, the total cost of stationery for the Department in the two languages amounts to £12,804, of which my stationery costs less than £500.

Tá idir Ghaeilge agus Bhéarla ar pháipéar litreacha agus ar pháipéarachas na Roinne le ceanteideal agus níl costas suntasach breise ann le húsáid na Gaeilge. Ó bhí an Nollaig 1999 ann, ba é £12,804 costas iomlán an pháipéarachais sa dá theanga ar an Roinn, as sin níos lú ná £500 a bhí ar chostas an pháipéarachais s'agamsa.

White City District

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps will be taken to address the physical and psychological effects suffered by residents in the White City area of Belfast as a result of attacks on their homes; and to make a statement. (AQW 1268/01)

Ms de Brún: The North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust have also taken a number of specific measures to deal with the current situation in North Belfast, including the White City district. These measures include: the establishment of forums to assist with the co-ordination of statutory, voluntary and community organisations; the provision of a confidential freephone helpline to support distressed individuals; and a crisis response team, which has met with community organisations to identify needs and develop appropriate responses, including group counselling. Additional resources of £104,000 have been provided to underpin these services.

Tá roinnt bearta sonracha glactha freisin ag an Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialacha Thuaisceart agus Iarthar Bhéal Feirste le déileáil leis an staid faoi láthair i dTuaisceart Bhéal Feirste lena n-áirítear ceantar White City. Áirítear ar na bearta: bunú fóram chun cuidiú le comhordú eagraíochtaí statúideacha, deonacha agus pobail; soláthar líne fóin cabhrach rúnda chun cuidiú le daoine aonair faoi bhrú; agus an fhoireann freagartha géarchéime a chas le heagraíochtaí pobail chun riachtanais a aithint agus freagairtí cuí a fhorbairt, lena n-áirítear comhchomhairliúcháin grúpaí. Tá acmhainní breise de 104, 000 curtha ar fáil chun bonn a chur faoi na seirbhísí sin.

Paramilitary Attacks

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list, in each of the last five years, (a) the number of patients treated at hospitals as a result of paramilitary attacks, broken down into type of injuries; and (b) the number and type of operations carried out on patients whose injuries have been received as a result of paramilitary attacks; and (c) the cost of treating such patients. (AQW 1273/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Hospital Acquired Infection

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she intends to take to improve her strategy for tackling hospital acquired infection. (AQW 1278/01)

Ms de Brún: An action programme for the management and control of infection in hospitals has been put in place on foot of my Department's circular, HSS 9/2000, which was issued in April 2000. This plan includes enhanced surveillance of hospital-acquired infections, including hospital-acquired bacteraemias. My Department has funded the new Healthcare-Associated Infection Surveillance Centre (HISC), and provided additional funding to the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre (CDSC).

At the end of this month my Department's antimicrobial resistance action plan will be launched. It will contain clear action required by trusts, and others, to prevent hospital acquired infection. All trusts have participated in a recent survey of their infection control procedures and the results are currently being analysed. In addition, my Department is looking at ways to improve hospital cleanliness.

Tá clár gnímh do bhainistiú agus rialú ionfhabhtú in ospidéal bunaithe ar scor chiorclán HSS 9/2000 mo Roinne a heisíodh Aibreán 2000. Áirítear sa phlean sin faireachán feabhsaithe ar ionfhabhtuithe ospidéalshealbhaithe, lena n-áirítear baictéaraemia ospidéalshealbhaithe. Tá maoiniú déanta ag mo Roinn ar an Ionad Faireacháin Ionfhabhtaithe a Bhaineann le Cúram Sláinte (HISC) agus chuir maoiniú breise ar fáil d'Ionad Faireacháin Galar Intholghtha. (CDSC)

Ag deireadh na míosa seo déanfar *Antimicrobial Resistance Action Plan* mo Roinne a lánseáil. Beidh ann gníomh glan a éileofar ar na hIontaobhais agus ar dhreamanna eile chun ionfhabhtú ospidéalshealbhaithe a chosc. Ghlac gach Iontaobhas páirt sa suirbhé le gairid ar nósanna imeachta rialaithe ionfhabhtaithe agus tá anailís a déanamh faoi láthair ar na torthaí. Chomh maith leis sin tá mo Roinn ag féachaint ar shlite chun glaineacht ospidéal a fheabhsú.

Palliative Care Provisions

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what palliative care provisions are currently available for non-cancer suffering patients. (AQW 1279/01)

Ms de Brún: There are no specific palliative care facilities for non-cancer suffering patients. However, specialist palliative care staff advise their colleagues in hospital and the community on individual patients as the need arises.

Níl aon saoráidí sonracha cúraim mhaolaithigh d'othair nach bhfuil ag fulaingt ó ailse. Comhairlionn sainfhoireann cúraim maolaithigh áfach a gcuid comhghleacaithe sna hospidéal agus sa phobal faoi othair aonair de réir mar is gá.

Ulster Hospital: Staffing Over Christmas and New Year Period

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of staff available for duty at the Ulster Hospital over the Christmas and new year period; and (b) if any staff shortages occurred during this period. (AQW 1292/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on the number of staff available for duty at the Ulster Hospital over the Christmas and new year period is not held centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. The Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust have stated that no abnormal staff shortages were reported over the Christmas and new year period.

Ní choinnítear go lárnach an t-eolas ar an líon foirne ar dualgas ag Ospidéal Uladh thar thréimhse na Nollag agus na nuabhlíana agus ní fhéadfaí an t-eolas a fháil gan chostas míchuí. Tá sé ráite ag Iontaobhas Ospidéal agus Pobal Uladh nár tuairiscíodh aon chiorruithe neamhghnácha foirne thar thréimhse na Nollag agus na nuabhlíana.

Waiting Times: Accident and Emergency, Ulster Hospital

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) the average waiting time; (ii) the shortest waiting time; and (iii) the longest waiting time for treatment at the accident and emergency department at the Ulster Hospital over the Christmas and new year period. (AQW 1293/01)

Ms de Brún: Between 25 December 2001 and 1 January 2002, the average time waiting to be seen at the accident and emergency department of the Ulster Hospital was two hours.

Details of the maximum and minimum waiting time by triage priority at the Ulster Hospital accident and emergency Department over the same period are given in the table below. Waiting time is defined as the difference between the time that the patient was registered on the

computer system on arrival to the time of examination by a doctor.

	Shortest Waiting Time	Longest Waiting Time
Priority 1	2 minutes	4 minutes
Priority 2	1 minute	2 hrs 30 mins
Priority 3	2 minutes	5 hrs 2 mins
Priority 4	2 minutes	5 hrs 57 mins
Priority 5	11 minutes	3 hrs 5 mins

Idir 25 Nollaig 2001 agus 1 Eanáir 2002 ba é an meánam feithimh le go bhfeicfidh othar ag an Roinn T&É in Ospidéal Uladh ná 2 uair a choig.

Tá mionsonraí faoi uasam feithimh agus íosam feithimh de réir tosaíocht triach ag Roinn T&É in Ospidéal Uladh thar an thréimhse chéanna tugtha sa tábla thíos. Sainítear am feithimh mar an difríocht idir an t-am a gcláraítear an t-othar ar an gcóras ríomhaire ar theacht dó nó di go dtí an t-am a scrúdaíonn dochtúir é nó í.

	Íosam Feithimh Am	Uasam Feithimh Am
Tosaíocht 1	2 bomaite	4 bomaite
Tosaíocht 2	1 bomaite	2 ur 30 bomaite
Tosaíocht 3	2 bomaite	5 ur 2 bomaite
Tosaíocht 4	2 bomaite	5 ur 57 bomaite
Tosaíocht 5	11 bomaite	3 ur 5 bomaite

Adoption Panels: Determinations

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether an adoption panel's determination is available in full to the applicants. (AQW 1296/01)

Ms de Brún: An adoption panel can only make recommendations about adoption. It is for an adoption agency to make decisions, after taking the panel's recommendations into account, and to communicate its decision, in writing, to the applicant as soon as possible.

Agencies are required to treat as confidential any information obtained in the course of their adoption work and any recommendations which may be made to them. The agency, therefore, should not provide a copy of the panel's deliberations.

If the decision is that the applicant is not suitable to be an adoptive parent it would normally be appropriate, as a matter of good practice, for the formal written notification to be given in the course of a counselling interview at which the reasons for the agency's decision would, wherever possible, be explained.

Ní féidir le painéal uchtaithe ach moltaí a dhéanamh faoi uchtú. Is faoi ghníomhaireacht uchála é cinnidh a dhéanamh tar éis dóibh moltaí an phainéil a ghlacadh

san áireamh agus an cinneadh a chur in iúl i scríbhinn don iarratasóir chomh luath agus is féidir.

Tá ceanglas ar ghníomhaireachtaí aon eolas a fháil siad le linn a gcuid oibre uchtála a choinneáil faoi rún agus aon mholtaí a dhéantar dóibh. Níor chóir don phainéal mar sin cóip de phlé an phainéil a chur ar fáil.

Más é an cinneadh a dhéantar nach mbíonn iarratasóir oiriúnach le bheith ina t(h)uismitheoir uchtála bheadh sé cuí de ghnáth mar dheachleachtas an fógra foirmiúil i scríbhinn a thabhairt le linn agallaimh comhchomhairle nuair a dhéanfaí cúiseanna le cinneadh na gníomhaireachta, nuair a d'fhéadfaí sin a chor ar bith a mhíniú.

Adoption Agencies: Home Study

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the estimated time-scale for a home study in regards to an adoption panel.

(AQW 1298/01)

Ms de Brún: Adoption agencies are required to obtain personal, family and social information about prospective adopters — known as a "home study" — as part of the assessment process. While unnecessary delays should be avoided, the length of the process largely depends on the applicants' circumstances.

Tá ceanglas ar ghníomhaireachtaí uchtála eolas pearsanta, teaghlaigh agus sóisialta — ar a dtugtar 'staidéar baile' a fháil faoi uchtóirí ionchasacha mar chuid den phróiseas measúnaithe. Siúd is gur chóir moill gan ghá a sheachaint braitheann achar an phróisis ar imthosca an iarratasóra.

General Practitioner Vacancies

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of general practitioner vacancies currently in each health board area; and (b) this figure as a percentage of the total required for each health board area.

(AQW 1309/01)

Ms de Brún: The number of general practitioner vacancies in each health board area at 10 January 2002 are shown in the table below. There is, however, no required number of general practitioners for each health board and so there is no information available to answer the second part of the question.

Board	Number of GPs	Number of Vacancies	Total
Eastern	431	1	432
Northern	251	0	251
Southern	203	0	203
Western	183	1	184
Total	1068	2	1070

The vacant posts will be filled in February 2002. Applications have also been made for one additional general practitioner post in each of the Southern and Western Health and Social Services Boards, however these have yet to be approved.

Tá líon na bhfolúntais dochtúirí teaghlach i ngach limistéar Bord Sláinte amhail ar an 10 Eanáir 2002 léirithe sa tábla thíos. Níl aon líon dochtúirí teaghlach riachtanach áfach do gach Bord Sláinte agus mar sin níl aon eolas ar fáil chun an dara cuid den cheist a fhreagairt.

Bord	Líon DT	Líon Folúntas	Iomlán
an Oirthir	431	1	432
an Tuaiscirt	251	0	251
an Deiscirt	203	0	203
an Iarthair	183	1	184
Iomlán	1068	2	1070

Líonfar na poist fholamha i Feabhra 2002. Tá iarratais déanta freisin ar phost dochtúir teaghlaigh breise i ngach ceann de Bhoird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt agus an Iarthair, níl siad ceadaithe fós áfach.

Travelling Expenses and Remission of Charges Regulations (NI) 1989

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline any reimbursement of travel costs that NHS patients receive when required to travel outside of their local health board area to take up an appointment.

(AQW 1310/01)

Ms de Brún: The Travelling Expenses and Remission of Charges Regulations (NI) 1989 provide for the payment of travelling expenses for people attending hospitals here for treatment under the health and social services. Entitlement to payment of hospital travelling expenses is based on qualifying social security benefits or on grounds of low income. Payment for patient travel to hospitals elsewhere is payable as part of the treatment costs and does not fall within the hospital travel cost scheme.

Soláthraíonn na Rialacháin Athghnóthú Muirear agus Costais Taistil (TÉ) 1989 d'íocaíocht costais taistil le daoine a bhíonn ag freastal ar ospidéal do chóireáil faoi na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta. Tá teideal chun íocaíochta costais taistil ospidéal bunaithe ar shochair leasa shóisialaigh cháilitheacha agus ar fhorais ioncaim íseal. Tá íoc as taistil othar chuig ospidéal in áiteanna eile iníoctha mar chuid de na costais chóireála agus ní bhaineann leis an scéim costais taistil ospidéal.

2000 Infant Feeding Survey

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what proportion of

women smoke during pregnancy according to latest available figures. (AQW 1311/01)

Ms de Brún: Initial results from the 2000 Infant Feeding Survey, show that 35% of mothers here smoked before they became pregnant, with 22% continuing to do so during pregnancy.

In March last year I established an inter-sectoral working group on tobacco to develop and oversee the implementation of a comprehensive action plan to tackle smoking. The plan, which identifies pregnant women who smoke as a key target group, will be issued for consultation in the spring.

Léiríonn na chéad torthaí ar Shuirbhé Beathaithe Naonán 2000 gur chaith 35% de na máithreacha tobac sula raibh siad torrach agus gur lean 22% á dhéanamh le linn a bheith ag iompar.

I Márta na bliana anuraidh bhunaigh mé Grúpa Oibre idirearnálacha ar Thobac chun plean gnímh cuimsitheach a fhorbairt agus maoirsiú a dhéanamh ar a fheidhmiú chun tabhairt faoi chaitheamh tobac. Déanfar an plean, a aithníonn mná torracha a chaitheann tobac mar spriocgrúpa lánrach, a eisiúint le haghaidh comhchomhairle san Earrach.

National Service Framework for Mental Health

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to meet the National Service Framework for Mental Health set up for England and Wales. (AQW 1318/01)

Ms de Brún: The National Service Framework for Mental Health for England and Wales is, as stated, a framework for England and Wales.

Is creat do Shasana agus don Bhreatain Bheag, mar a dúradh an Creat Seirbhíse Náisiúnta do Mheabhairshláinte, do Shasana agus don Bhreatain Bheag.

Policy Review on Mental Health

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) if a policy review on mental health has been agreed for the Eastern Health and Social Services Board; and (b) when will it commence. (AQW 1319/01)

Ms de Brún: A policy review on mental health for the Eastern Health and Social Services Board has been agreed. The review commenced in November 2001.

Tá athbhreithniú polasaí ar mheabhairshláinte do Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialacha an Oirthir comhaontaithe. Thosaigh an t-athbhreithniú i Samhain 2001.

Mental Health Expenditure

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of the mental health budget, per health board area, which is spent on (a) people; (b) property; and (c) care. (AQW 1320/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on the mental health budget is not held in the format requested. The table below [*page WA27*] shows mental health expenditure by board area and classified by hospital, community and personal social services expenditure for 1999-2000 (the latest figures available).

	NHSSB	SHSSB	EHSSB	WHSSB	Total
Hospital	£15,838,822	£9,111,018	£37,121,639	£11,208,263	£73,279,742
Community	£2,953,822	£2,210,745	£9,095,795	£6,369,674	£20,630,036
PSS	£6,379,705	£5,486,979	£10,176,221	£7,911,994	£29,954,899
Total	£25,172,349	£16,808,742	£56,393,655	£25,489,931	£123,864,677

Ms de Brún: Níl eolas ar an mbuiséad meabhairshláinte coinnithe san fhormaid a hiarradh. Léiríonn an tábla thíos caiteachas meabhairshláinte de réir Limistéir Bhord agus atá aicmithe de réir chaiteachas Ospidéal, Pobail agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta (PSS) do 1999/2000 (na figiúirí is déanaí atá ar fáil).

	NHSSB	SHSSB	EHSSB	WHSSB	Iomlán
Ospidéal	£15,838,822	£9,111,018	£37,121,639	£11,208,263	£73,279,742
Pobal	£2,953,822	£2,210,745	£9,095,795	£6,369,674	£20,630,036
PSS	£6,379,705	£5,486,979	£10,176,221	£7,911,994	£29,954,899
Iomlán	£25,172,349	£16,808,742	£56,393,655	£25,489,931	£123,864,677

Mental Health Problems

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people, per Board Area, are suffering from mental health problems.

(AQW 1321/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Mental Health Strategy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps is she taking to co-ordinate and promote a mental health strategy in each of the four health boards.

(AQW 1322/01)

Ms de Brún: Each health and social services board is responsible for assessing the needs of their local population and developing mental health strategies to meet those needs. My Department, as part of an imminent review of mental health legislation, will also be reviewing the overall mental health strategy.

Tá gach Bord Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta freagrach as measúnú a dhéanamh ar a ndaonra áitiúil agus maidir le straitéisí meabhairshláinte a fhorbairt chun freastal ar na riachtanais sin. Beidh mo Roinnse fosta, mar chuid den athbhreithniú a thiochfaidh go luath ar reachtaíocht meabhairshláinte, ag athbhreithniú na straitéise meabhairshláinte tríd is tríd.

Hospital Acquired Infections: Reductions

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her future targets for yearly reductions in the number of hospital acquired infections.

(AQW 1341/01)

Ms de Brún: Once baseline data is available from our surveillance systems, it will be possible to better quantify the problem and specify the approaches for addressing it, including setting targets where these are appropriate.

Chomh luath agus a bheidh bunachair bonnlíne ar fáil ónár gcuid córais faireacháin féadfar an fhadhb a chainníochtú níos fearr agus na cur chuigí le tabhairt faoi a shonrú lena n-áirítear spriocanna a leagan amach nuair is cuí sin.

X-ray Results

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Health Board area, the average length of time for the result of an x-ray, taken at a local practice, to be communicated to the patient.

(AQW 1346/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Mental Health Strategy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the targets set by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board within its mental health strategy.

(AQW 1347/01)

Ms de Brún: The Eastern Health and Social Services Board mental health strategy targets are to produce a draft strategic plan for public consultation by November 2002 and produce the final strategic plan by March 2003.

Tá spriocanna straitéise Mheabhairshláinte EHSSB chun dréachtphlean straitéiseach a sholáthar do

chomhchomhairle phoiblí faoi Shamhain 2002 agus plean straitéiseach deiridh a sholáthar faoi Mhárta 2003.

Attendances at Accident and Emergency, Ulster Hospital

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients that attended the accident and emergency department at the Ulster Hospital over Christmas and the new year. (AQW 1349/01)

Ms de Brún: Between 25 December 2001 and 1 January 2002, there were 1,358 attendances at the accident and emergency department of the Ulster Hospital.

Idir 25 Nollaig 2001 agus 1 Eanáir 2002, rinneadh 1,358 freastal ar Roinn T&É Ospidéal Uladh.

Bank and Agency Nurses

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how she plans to reduce the number of bank and agency nurses currently being utilised within the Health Service. (AQW 1351/01)

Ms de Brún: An assessment of the use of bank and agency nurses is included in my Department's current workforce planning initiative.

The funding of additional student nurse places in 2000 and 2001 and ongoing provision of free training for qualified nurses wishing to return practice are amongst a range of initiatives designed to enhance the supply of qualified nursing staff and reduce the need to employ bank/agency nursing staff.

Tá measúnú ar úsáid altráí bainc agus gníomhaireachta áirithe i dtionscnamh pleanála reatha fórsa saothair.

Tá maoiniú breise d'áiteanna do mhic léinn altranais in 2000 agus 2001 agus soláthar leanúnach oiliúint in aisce d'altraí cáilithe ar mian leo filleadh ar an gcleachtas i measc raon na dtionscnamh atá leagtha amach chun cur le soláthar fhoireann altráí cáilithe agus an gá atá le foireann altranais bainc/gníomhaireachta a laghdú.

Home Helps

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are in receipt of regular visits from Home Helps. (AQW 1358/01)

Ms de Brún: At 31 March 2001 (the latest date for which information is available) there were 27,401 people receiving the Home Help service here.

Amhail ar an 31 Márta 2001 (an dáta is déanaí a bhfuil eolas ar fáil ina leith) bhí 27,401 duine ag fáil seirbhís Chúnamh Baile anseo.

Home Help Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to increase budget resources for the home help service. (AQW 1359/01)

Ms de Brún: The Department does not allocate money specifically for the provision of home help services. Decisions on the actual amounts of expenditure necessary are made by individual trusts in line with levels of need and the resources available to them.

The need for increased resources for community services are considered as part of the annual review of funding for the community care programme. I shall be examining the need for increased investment in the home help service together with all other emerging pressures on the community care programme in developing my expenditure proposals for 2003-04.

Ní leithroinneann an Roinn airgead go sonrach do sholáthar sheirbhísí Chúnamh Baile. Is iad na hÍontaobhais aonair ag teacht le leibhéal riachtanas agus na n-acmhainní a bhíonn ar fáil dóibh a dhéanann cinntí maidir le suimeanna iarbhír caiteachais.

Breithnítear an gá atá le breis acmhainní do sheirbhísí pobail mar chuid d'athbhreithniú bliantúil maoinithe don chlár cúraim pobail. Beidh mé ag scrúdú an gá atá le breis infheistíochta sa tseirbhís Chúnamh Baile chomh maith leis na brúnna eile atá ag teacht chun cinn ar an gelár cúraim pobail agus mé ag forbairt mo chuid tograí caiteachais do 2003/04.

Hague Convention on Protection of Children

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made to ensure that overseas adoption policy is streamlined. (AQW 1363/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department is working to regulate the procedures involved and to ratify the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in respect of intercountry adoption which aims to establish safeguards to protect the interests of the child and to put in place a system of co-operation between countries to prevent the abduction of, the sale of and the traffic in children.

Tá mo Roinn ag obair chun na nósanna imeachta bainteacha a rialú agus chun Coinbheansean Hague ar Chosaint Leanaí agus Comhoibriú maidir le hUchtú Idirthíortha a dhaingniú, a bhfuil mar aidhm leo cosaintí chun leasa an linbh a bhunú agus córas comhoibrithe

idir tíortha a bhunú chun fuadach, díol agus mangaireacht leanaí a chosc.

Consultation: Timescales

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what recommendations she has made to general practitioners regarding the amount of time that should be made available for consultation for each patient; and to make a statement. (AQW 1370/01)

Ms de Brún: None. Each consultation is unique. In general the length of time a general practitioner spends in consultation with a patient is determined by his or her clinical judgement and the needs of the individual patient.

Níl aon mholadh. Is comhchomhairle ar leithligh gach comhchomhairle. Go ginearáta is é breithiúnas cliniciúil an dochtúir teaghlaigh agus riachtanais an othair aonair a chinneann an t-achar ama a chaitheann an dochtúir sin i gcomhchomhairle leis an othar.

Private Health Care Providers

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has for expanding the role played by private health care providers; and to make a statement. (AQW 1375/01)

Ms de Brún: I have no plans to expand the role played by private health care providers in the Health and Personal Social Services.

The private sector is already involved in the provision of nursing home facilities and the Health and Personal Social Services also makes some use of private hospital services here and elsewhere. I am conscious, however, of the impact this can have on the overall resources available to the Health and Personal Social Services and it remains my first priority to use those resources to build capacity within the Health and Personal Social Services to meet the demand.

Tá pleananna agam chun an ról atá ag soláthróirí cúraim sláinte príobháideacha sa SSSP a leathnú.

Tá baint ag an earnáil phríobháideach cheana féin le saoráidí tithe altranais a sholáthar agus baineann an SSSP roinnt leasa as seirbhísí ospidéal príobháideach anseo agus in áiteanna eile. Tuigim áfach an tionchar a d'fhéadfadh a bheith aige sin ar na hacmhainní tríd is tríd atá ar fáil don SSSP agus is í an chéad tosaíocht atá agam na hacmhainní sin a úsáid leis an acmhainn laistigh den SSSP a neartú chun freastal ar an éileamh.

Stem Cell Research

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment she has

made of the progress and effectiveness of adult stem cell research in treating health disorders.

(AQW 1377/01)

Ms de Brún: Increasing advances in biological sciences, including the development of human stem cells, are creating promising prospects for the development of a number of treatments such as Parkinson's disease, diabetes, heart disease, cancer and injuries for which there are no effective treatments and cures today. Patients with leukaemia have already benefited from infusion of cells as a treatment.

Tá ionchais a bhfuil geallúint fúthu á gcruthú ag dul chun cinn atá siorú ag méadú sna heolaíochtaí bitheolaíochta, lena n-áirítear forbairt ghaschealla daonna maidir le forbairt roinnt cóireálacha mar ghalar Parkinson, diaibéiteas, galar croí, ailse agus gortuithe nach bhfuil aon chóireálacha éifeachtacha nó leigheas ann dóibh faoi láthair. Tá leas déanta cheana féin ag insileadh cealla mar chóireáil d'othair a bhfuil leukaemia orthu.

Care for Cancer Patients

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in the improvement of care for cancer patients.

(AQW 1378/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 1078/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 1078/01.

Dementia

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment she has made of recent research into the causes and treatment of dementia.

(AQW 1379/01)

Ms de Brún: Dementia takes many forms and has various underlying causes including genetic elements, hypertension and trauma. Research into dementia therefore involves many different professional groups and the results of research relating to the many aspects of dementia are published in a variety of professional journals, where they are read and utilised as appropriate by the relevant clinicians.

Proposals within my Department's consultation document 'Best Practice Best Care' published last year, regarding clinical and social care governance address the issue of ensuring that clinicians keep abreast of the latest developments, engage in lifelong learning and use the most up-to-date effective treatments.

Tá cineálacha go leor dementia ann agus bíonn cúiseanna éagsúla leis, lena n-áirítear gnéithe géiniteacha,

heipeartheannas, agus tráma. Baineann go leor grúpaí gairmiúla mar sin le taighde ar dementia agus foilsítear torthaí taighde a bhaineann le gnéithe iomadúla dementia i réimse irisí gairmiúla, áit a léitear iad agus a n-úsáideann cliniceoirí iomchuí mar is cuí iad.

Tugann moltaí i gcáipéis chomhchomhairle mo Roinne “Best Practice Best Care” a foilsíodh anuraidh maidir le rialú cúram cliniciúil agus sóisialta aghaidh ar an cheist faoina chinntiú go gcoinneoidh cliniceoirí cothrom le dáta leis na forbairtí is déanaí, go mbeidh siad ag gabháil d’fhoghlaim feadh saoil agus go mbainfidh siad leas as na cóireálacha éifeachtacha is cothroime le dáta.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Senior Citizen Concession Passes

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of senior citizens who have been issued with free travel passes by (a) constituency; (b) district council area; and (c) post code area.

(AQW 1160/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): Translink has advised that the information held about the current addresses of senior citizen concession pass holders is incomplete. Translink hold only the addresses of those 70,000 or so senior citizens to whom concession passes have been issued over the last five years. These are the addresses occupied at the time of issue of the passes and about 8,000 of them do not contain postcodes. Translink has provided the following information for the postcoded addresses held in its database.

Postcode Area	Passes Issued	Postcode Area	Passes Issued
BT01	38	BT48	1,712
BT02	50	BT49	507
BT03	34	BT50	1
BT04	1,430	BT51	658
BT05	2,361	BT52	484
BT06	1,843	BT53	487
BT07	689	BT54	165
BT08	1,337	BT55	355
BT09	1,346	BT56	315
BT10	689	BT57	151
BT11	1,970	BT58	4
BT12	1,628	BT59	1
BT13	1,661	BT60	736
BT14	1,971	BT61	503
BT15	1,779	BT62	883
BT16	730	BT63	608
BT17	973	BT64	23
BT18	669	BT65	180
BT19	1,141	BT66	1,155
BT20	1,133	BT67	598
BT21	354	BT68	41
BT22	617	BT69	63
BT23	1,871	BT70	387
BT24	475	BT71	797
BT25	352	BT72	7
BT26	303	BT73	7
BT27	866	BT74	369
BT28	1,137	BT75	60
BT29	218	BT76	48
BT30	1,013	BT77	43
BT31	197	BT78	751
BT32	828	BT79	603
BT33	587	BT80	474
BT34	1,851	BT81	188
BT35	1,223	BT82	683
BT36	1,715	BT83	1
BT37	1,083	BT84	3
BT38	1,531	BT85	1
BT39	760	BT86	7
BT40	1,268	BT87	5
BT41	1,118	BT88	18
BT42	1,116	BT90	2
BT43	739	BT91	1
BT44	547	BT92	145
BT45	613	BT93	110
BT46	170	BT94	127
BT47	1,648		

Information on the number of passes issued by constituency and district council area is not available. However, Translink is taking steps to create a revised database linked to its new ticketing system. This will generate better information about the take up of concession passes and it should be possible to extract more information automatically on an area basis.

Gritting Bins

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of gritting bins issued in each local District Council area in each of the last three years. (AQW 1294/01)

Mr P Robinson: The approximate numbers of salt bins provided by my Department's Roads Service in each district council area during the last three years are detailed in the attached appendix. This sets out the cumulative total over the last three years.

In urban areas (including housing estates), salt bins may be provided on roads which are adopted by Roads Service but are not included in the salting schedule. To qualify for consideration for the provision of a salt bin, the gradient of a road should be equal to, or greater than, 5% (ie, 1 in 20) and a reasonable alternative route on the salting schedule should not be available. Other criteria taken into account are the road geometry, residential and commercial usage and community welfare reasons.

APPENDIX

SALT BINS ISSUED WITHIN THE LAST THREE YEARS

District Council Area	Number of Salt Bins Issued		
	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002
Antrim	40	48	58
Ards	104	109	115
Armagh	121	121	121
Ballymena	196	199	203
Ballymoney	25	28	30
Banbridge	162	185	187
Belfast	90	92	107
Carrickfergus	24	28	32
Castlereagh	97	104	120
Coleraine	192	195	199
Cookstown	48	58	64
Craigavon	43	48	49
Derry City	54	56	58
Down	182	184	199
Dungannon	48	51	55
Fermanagh	36	61	95
Larne	32	34	36
Limavady	169	184	196
Lisburn	186	192	198
Magherafelt	39	43	50
Moyle	39	39	40
Newry & Mourne	245	250	259
Newtownabbey	95	106	117

District Council Area	Number of Salt Bins Issued		
	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002
North Down	138	140	142
Omagh	42	59	86
Strabane	19	26	25
Totals	2466	2640	2841

Gritting Bins

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the criteria for the provision of gritting bins for housing estates. (AQW 1295/01)

Mr P Robinson: The approximate numbers of salt bins provided by my Department's Roads Service in each district council area during the last three years are detailed in the attached appendix. This sets out the cumulative total over the last three years.

In urban areas (including housing estates), salt bins may be provided on roads which are adopted by Roads Service but are not included in the salting schedule. To qualify for consideration for the provision of a salt bin, the gradient of a road should be equal to, or greater than, 5% (ie, 1 in 20) and a reasonable alternative route on the salting schedule should not be available. Other criteria taken into account are the road geometry, residential and commercial usage and community welfare reasons.

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Water Supply: Cherry Hill, Rostrevor

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he will take to improve the water supply at Cherry Hill, Rostrevor. (AQW 1316/01)

Mr P Robinson: Cherry Hill is a private development which is situated in an elevated location. Consequently, bursts in the watermains in the overall supply area can result in the loss of water supply to the development. This has occurred on two occasions over the past few years.

The most recent incident involved periodic interruptions between 2 to 4 January 2002 and was caused by bursts in the watermains following the adverse weather conditions over the Christmas/new year period. Water Service regrets the inconvenience that this caused to the residents of Cherry Hill. Water Service staff worked continuously over this period to locate and repair bursts and provide information and advice to customers.

Over the past three years Water Service has spent £2.5 million upgrading the water distribution system which serves the Rostrevor/Warrenpoint area. This has considerably enhanced the security of the water supply to the Cherry Hill development. Assessments are being carried out to identify if other watermains require replacement.

Water Service also proposes to build two new service reservoirs in the area at a cost of some £500,000. The service reservoir proposed for Leitrim, Rostrevor should further enhance the security of the water supply to the Cherry Hill development. Construction is programmed to commence in June of this year and will take 11 months to complete.

Road Gritting

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the hours worked by both full-time staff and private contractors in respect of road gritting duties in both the Newry sectional office and the Armagh sectional office during the Christmas 2001/new year period. (AQW 1326/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, between 25 December 2001 and 2

January 2002, the total number of hours spent on road gritting duties by its Newry and Mourne and Armagh section offices was 604 hours and 830 hours respectively. Of these, 241 hours and 67 hours were worked by private contractors in the Newry and Mourne and Armagh areas respectively.

Attacks on Vehicles

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of attacks on (i) Citybus vehicles (ii) Ulsterbus vehicles and (iii) Northern Ireland Railways trains in the last twelve months. (AQW 1386/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that during the last 12 months the cost of damage caused by attacks to Citybus and Ulsterbus vehicles and NIR trains were £340,000, £370,000, and £162,000 respectively, giving an overall total of £872,000. These costs are only the direct cost of repairs, ie labour and materials. They do not include the loss of fare revenue that arises when vehicles have to be taken out of service without warning, the cost of personal injury claims from staff and the public which may be settled later and other consequential losses which are difficult to quantify.

I deplore and condemn without reservation these wanton acts of vandalism on public transport vehicles. The money that Translink has used to repair the vehicles could obviously have been much better utilised in improving services. Furthermore, these acts of vandalism do nothing to encourage the general public to utilise public transport. I will therefore continue to support Translink in its ongoing efforts to try and eradicate such problems.

Rolling Stock: Contracts

Mr Neeson asked the Minister for Regional Development when contracts are expected to be signed for the new rolling stock on the Larne railway line. (AQW 1434/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that it hopes to be in a position to award supplier contracts for new rolling stock towards the end of February, subject to the satisfactory completion of final tender negotiations.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Home Adaptations

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the number of home

adaptations, recommended by an occupational therapist, that have been completed in each of the last three years.
(AQW 1364/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds):

The information is not held in the form requested. However at 31 March 2001 the numbers by Housing Executive area are as follows.

	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001
Private Grant Aided			
Belfast	200	182	198
North East	213	225	192
South	253	283	276
South East	156	162	173
West	219	279	299
Total	1041	1131	1138

These figures include both completions for disabled facilities grants and for disabled adaptations grants, which are available under minor works assistance.

	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001
Public - Major Works			
Belfast	1042	611	576
North East	240	347	520
South	210	430	505
South East	319	491	479
West	195	418	468
Total	2006	2297	2548

These figures include substantial numbers of changes of heating for people with disabilities which from March 2001 have been carried out without the involvement of an occupational therapist. The numbers of adaptations carried out on occupational therapist's recommendations will therefore fall from 2001-02 year onwards.

	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001
Public - Minor Works			
Belfast	1943	1599	1224
North East	1570	1786	1538
South	1330	1402	1269
South East	1722	1749	1557
West	1678	1524	1267
Total	8243	8060	6855

The Housing Executive also carries out a significant number of minor works for people with disabilities. These include handrails, ramps, lever taps, lowering of cupboards etc. Some of these are carried out on the recommendation of an occupational therapist while

others are carried out directly by the Housing Executive. The Housing Executive does not gather statistics on the numbers where an occupational therapist was involved. These figures include minor works carried out with or without an occupational therapist's recommendation. As the result of a review, the number of types of minor works that the Housing Executive can carry out without an occupational therapist's recommendation has been increased.

New Housing Units

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the number of new homes for social renting that were constructed over the last five years; and (b) the number expected to be constructed over the next five years. (AQW 1368/01)

Mr Dodds: The number of new units started and planned over the last five years is as follows:

Year	Housing Associations	Housing Executive	Total
1996/97	1265	915	2180
1997/98	1600	452	2052
1998/99	2108	90	2198
1999/00	1744	49	1793
2000/01	1104	42	1146

The current starts target for the current and each of the following four years is 11,200 units per annum.

Central Heating Systems

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Executive houses which have central heating systems more than 15 years old. (AQW 1369/01)

Mr Dodds: Some 39,500 dwellings have glass fronted solid fuel fires and of these properties, 4,400 have appliances over 15 years old. In addition the Housing Executive has 24,000 properties with Economy 7 and 27,500 properties with open fire central heating. While these have a longer life than roomheaters, the Housing Executive's heating strategy proposes their replacement over the next 13 years.

Pensioner Poverty

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline any recent discussions with other Government Departments in relation to reducing pensioner poverty in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1372/01)

Mr Dodds: Meetings with other Departments take place periodically to discuss a range of issues including those matters that affect pensioners in Northern Ireland.

The United Kingdom Government has developed a range of policies which are designed to combat pensioner poverty. Many pensioners in Northern Ireland will benefit from the various measures that will be introduced. Local initiatives to tackle pensioner poverty are also considered.

Jobseeker's Allowance: Number of Claimants

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of unemployed claimants by electoral ward in North Down. (AQW 1384/01)

Mr Dodds: The number of persons claiming Jobseeker's Allowance by electoral ward in the North Down constituency area are detailed in the table below.

The figures provided are the most recent available at 8 November 2001.

Ward	Claimants
Ballycrochan	41
Ballyholme	23
Ballymacconnell	40
Ballymagee	28
Bangor Castle	41
Bloomfield (North Down)	47
Broadway	30
Bryansburn	23
Churchill	25
Clandeboye	98
Conlig	127
Craigavad	18
Crawfordsburn	11
Cultra	20
Dufferin	74
Groomsport	26
Harbour (North Down)	156
Hollywood Demesne	36
Hollywood Priory	32
Loughview	63
Princetown	21
Rathgael	23
Silverstream	49
Spring Hill	28
Whitehill	69
Total	1,149

Homelessness Criteria: Financial Information

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to include other financial commitments such as furniture and car payments in the Housing Executive assessment of the financial position of persons who are having their house repossessed by a bank or building society. (AQW 1399/01)

Mr Dodds: Financial information is taken into account in determining whether

- i. an applicant fulfils the statutory homelessness criteria, one of which is he or she is unintentionally homeless; and
- ii. extra points can be awarded if not accepted as homeless.

In deciding intentionality, under the homelessness legislation, the Housing Executive takes account of the overall financial circumstances of the applicant, including non-housing costs such as those mentioned. The majority of applicants will, therefore, have their overall financial situation taken into account, including reasonable levels of indebtedness.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 1 February 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Hospitality Costs: December 2001

Mr Hilditch asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail (a) the cost of and (b) to whom it is providing hospitality during the month of December 2001. (AQW 1069/01)

Reply: During the month of December 2001 the First Minister hosted a presentation by Save the Children. Ministers Haughey and Nesbitt held working lunches for the UN Secretary General's Office and a Professor in Economics at the Ulster University. The total cost of these events was £426.

European Year of People with Disabilities

Mr Hussey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, in respect of the Employment and Social Affairs Council decision (IP/01/1714), to make a statement on the proposal to make 2003 the European Year of People with Disabilities; including the intention to support any events at regional and local level. (AQW 1152/01)

Reply: The designation of 2003 as the European Year of People with Disabilities is a positive development with worthwhile objectives. The UK Steering Group for the Year, on which Northern Ireland has sought representation, is scheduled to hold its first meeting next month.

As steering group plans develop we will make a statement on regional proposals to help meet the objectives of the Year.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what is the proposed completion date for the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 1179/01)

Reply: The Review of Public Administration will be very complex task and will need to be tackled in stages. The first stage is likely to last between 12 and 18 months.

Once details of the Review have been finalised by the Executive, including an indicative timetable, they will be made available to the Assembly.

Access Requirements for Disabled People

Mr Gibson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what steps it is taking to inform those who provide goods and services of the access requirements for disabled people. (AQW 1525/01)

Reply: Our department has lead policy responsibility for disability discrimination legislation which deals with access to goods, facilities and services for disabled people. It is the role of the Equality Commission to provide information and advice about that legislation and its requirements. The Commission advises, trains and informs disabled people of their rights, and organisations of their responsibilities, both as employers and providers of a service.

The Commission has prepared a revised and updated Code of Practice on Rights of Access to Goods, Facilities, Services and Premises which includes new and detailed information on the access requirements that will come into force in October 2004. The Code is presently under consideration by our department and is scheduled for publication later this year. This will ensure that service providers have the information they require to enable them to plan for the introduction of the new duties in 2003 and ensure that physical barriers for disabled people can, where reasonable, be overcome.

Single Equality Legislation

Mr Hussey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if consideration has been given to the possible inclusion, within single equality legislation, of provision similar to section 15(2) of the Republic of Ireland's Equal Status Act. [R] (AQW 1532/01)

Reply: Policy consideration on all aspects of the single equality legislation is still underway. No decisions have yet been made on the content of such legislation including whether there should be a non-discriminatory provision for the licensed trade similar to that in Irish legislation.

Community Relations

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline the timetable for the

cross-departmental strategy to promote community relations. (AQO 654/01)

Reply: Officials from our department have completed a wide-ranging series of meetings and workshops with key stakeholders, and have received substantial inputs to the review of community relations, which they are currently analysing. Various research reports have been commissioned on aspects of the review. These too are being assessed.

It is anticipated that a consultative document will be issued to all key stakeholders and interested bodies in April 2002, with a view to work beginning on the implementation of the agreed strategy by early autumn 2002.

North Belfast: Resources

Mr G Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what financial resources and support services have been committed for the North Belfast initiative announced in December 2001. (AQO 626/01)

Reply: On 3 December 2001, we, along with the Minister for Social Development, launched the North Belfast Community Action Project, with the aim of putting in place a plan of short, medium and long-term actions to address social and community issues in North Belfast. To date, funding of £250,000 has been committed to this project, to be provided jointly by our Department and the Department for Social Development. The secretariat and support services for the project are provided by a team of seven officials on secondment from the two Departments. The team is led by a senior official from our Department.

The Community Action Project is one of a number of measures to be taken by the Executive to deal with a range of social, economic and community issues in North Belfast. Other elements of the package include:

- a four-phased programme of road works designed to promote community safety in the Upper Ardoyne area. This will be facilitated by the Department for Regional Development, with the estimated costs of approximately £236,000 plus the cost of any land acquisition to be met by our Department;
- increased support for trauma and counselling services. This will be provided by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety through the North and West Belfast HSS Trust, with the additional costs of £104,000 being met by our Department.

The Minister for Education announced on 17 December 2001 a package of education measures to address the immediate needs of schools in the area and rebuild community relationships. A total of £1.5m will be available over the financial years 2001-02 to 2004-05 to support the following:

Support for 15 primary schools	£450k
Enhancement of Belfast Board Behavioural Support Unit	£250k
Additional Youth Workers	£500k
Additional after-school provision	£50k
Funding for art and music therapies	£30k
Refurbishment of Wheatfield Primary School	£100k
Development of St Gabriel's Secondary School playing field as an astro-turf facility for use by both communities.	£120k

The Department for Social Development is taking a number of steps to protect housing in the area.

There is already in existence a scheme to protect the homes of social tenants, ie, tenants of the Housing Executive and Housing Associations, living in interface areas, who require security measures to be installed to protect their homes from attacks.

In addition, officials in the Department for Social Development are working closely with colleagues in this Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel to develop a scheme and obtain the necessary funding to enable the Housing Executive to extend its scheme to cover homeowners who are at the greatest security risk. The details of this are still being finalised.

Primary Care Centre, Kilkeel

Mr McGrady asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister when will a decision be made on the application for financial assistance from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in respect of the development and construction of a Primary Care Centre in Kilkeel; and to make a statement. (AQO 602/01)

Reply: The successful bids were announced on 3 December 2001 by the Minister of Finance and Personnel on behalf of the Executive. This bid was one of the unsuccessful bids from the second tranche of allocations from three of the Executive Programme Funds.

All bids were scrutinised carefully against the criteria for the relevant Fund by DFP, the Economic Policy Unit and the Equality Unit working closely with all departments. Among other things, an assessment was made of the consistency of the proposals with the principles of New Targeting Social need and the statutory equality duty under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Executive was able to draw on this analysis in considering all of the bids.

Old Railway Bridge, Corcrain, Portadown

Mr Carrick asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it was consulted regarding

the reinstatement of the old railway bridge at Corcrair, Portadown. (AQO 615/01)

Reply: Our department has not been consulted regarding the reinstatement of the old railway bridge at Corcrair, Portadown. This matter is being dealt with by the Northern Ireland Office.

Third World: Cultural and Economic Links

Mr Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail plans to develop cultural and economic links with Third World countries; and to make a statement. (AQO 647/01)

Reply: The Executive does not have any specific plans to develop cultural and economic links with developing countries. However, the Executive Information Service has organised programmes for journalists from developing countries visiting Northern Ireland. These visits are part of a UK Government initiative.

Washington Office

Dr McDonnell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what plans they have to develop the Washington Office. (AQO 644/01)

Reply: We have already taken a number of steps to raise Northern Ireland's profile in the USA by developing the role of the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington.

Last summer the Bureau moved to its own suite of offices in downtown Washington. We have also strengthened the resources of the Bureau by engaging an additional member of staff to act as liaison officer with the US Administration and the media. The Bureau continues to develop and reinforce relationships with key contacts in Congress, the Administration and members of the Irish American community in the US through a series of outreach programmes.

Northern Ireland Court Service: Bi-Lateral Concordat

Mr J Wilson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if principles that will underlie the relationship between the Executive and the Northern Ireland Court Service have been agreed with the Lord Chancellor. (AQW 1752/01)

Reply: The principles that will underlie the relationship between the Northern Ireland Court Service and the Executive have been agreed between the Lord Chancellor's Department and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and are contained in a bilateral concordat published today. Copies of the Concordat have been placed in the Assembly Library.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Farming and Retailing Movement (NI)

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her policy on the promotion of 'Farmers' Markets' in town centres. (AQW 1487/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I welcome the establishment, by the Farming and Retailing Movement (NI), (FARM(NI)), of the Farm & Speciality Food Market in Belfast's St George's Market. Indeed, I have visited that market on 3 occasions. The success of farmers' markets is dependent on their ability to attract traders with the range and quality of produce to draw sufficient custom. Location and venue are also of critical importance. FARM(NI) has developed considerable expertise in this area over the past 3 years. I am aware of on-going discussions involving FARM(NI) and various parties across Northern Ireland regarding the establishment of similar markets in other suitable towns. These include Newry, Cookstown, Enniskillen, Coleraine and Bangor. The decision as to the suitability of particular towns and venues rests with FARM(NI) and the relevant local authority. However, I would be delighted to see the development of a comprehensive network of farmers' markets throughout Northern Ireland.

My Department will continue to work with FARM(NI) to facilitate this development.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on the effect for Northern Ireland's agriculture industry following HMG's statement, on 14 January 2002, that the United Kingdom has been declared free of Foot-and-Mouth Disease. (AQW 1493/01)

Ms Rodgers: The impact on Northern Ireland's industry will be positive and is good news, particularly as a result of the OIE decision to accept United Kingdom FMD freedom. As you are aware at the outset of FMD in GB I adopted the policy with respect to trade between GB and Northern Ireland similar to that which the EU required between GB and any other Member State.

The improving situation in GB has led the European Commission to relax trade control measures between GB and the rest of the EU. As a result live cattle and pig imports into Northern Ireland are likely to recommence in the future which will assist some sectors of the industry. Exports of live FMD susceptible species, of course, commenced in the latter part of 2001.

In discussion with my officials I am also reviewing the full range of FMD controls which we put in place in Northern Ireland. This includes the 20-day rule and portal controls on livestock, machinery and products. I will announce any decision on these matters as soon as the deliberations are completed.

Dairy Product: Export Refunds

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what contact has she made with the EU Commission regarding the reduced export funds on dairy products. (AQW 1511/01)

Ms Rodgers: When export refunds on dairy products were reduced by the EU Milk and Milk Products Management Committee I asked my officials to lobby strongly at future meetings for these to be restored. Then at a recent meeting with other UK Agricultural Ministers I impressed upon Mrs Beckett the need to put pressure on the EU Commission to secure an increase in refunds. Separately I also ensured that Commissioner Fischler was made aware of the importance of this matter for Northern Ireland. I am also pleased that producers and processors are united on this matter. The positive outcome at the Management Committee on 24 January is a result of the combined efforts of interested parties and their lobbying of the EU Commission.

Dairy Products: Export Refunds

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline if she will be lobbying the EU Commission for increases in export refunds on dairy products. (AQW 1512/01)

Ms Rodgers: In recognition of the deteriorating market situation for dairy products I and my officials have worked hard to secure an increase in export refunds. Then at the recent meeting with other UK Agriculture Ministers in London I impressed upon Mrs Beckett the need to put pressure on the EU Commission to secure an increase in refunds. Separately I also ensured that Commissioner Fischler was made aware of the importance of this matter for Northern Ireland. In addition my officials continued to press the Northern Ireland case at the regular EU Milk and Milk Products Management Committee meetings in Brussels. I am also pleased that producers and processors are united on this matter and have actively put pressure on the Commission to address the position quickly. The positive outcome at the Management Committee on 24 January is a result of the combined efforts of all interested parties. I hope that this will stabilise markets and improve the price being paid to producers. I will continue to keep the situation under review with the dairy industry.

Agricultural Industry: Workers

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of non-UK and non-Republic of Ireland citizens who are registered as working in the agricultural industry in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1531/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am sorry that I am unable to provide information on this. My Department does not collect such details.

Milk Powder: Export Refunds

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail any representations she has made on behalf of the dairy industry in relation to milk powder returns which have fallen below EU intervention support level. (AQW 1533/01)

Ms Rodgers: I and my officials have worked hard to secure an increase in export refunds. When export refunds for milk powders were reduced by the EU Milk and Milk Products Management Committee I asked my officials to lobby strongly at future meetings for these to be restored. Then at a recent meeting with other UK Agricultural Ministers I impressed upon Mrs Beckett the need to put pressure on the EU Commission to secure an increase. Separately I also ensured that Commissioner Fischler was made aware of the importance of this matter for Northern Ireland. I therefore welcome the positive outcome at the November, December and January Management Committee meetings when export refunds for both whole milk powder and skimmed milk powder were increased.

Milk Powder Prices

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement in relation to the continued fall of milk powder prices and what assessment has she made of the long-term impact this will have on the dairy industry. (AQW 1558/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am fully aware of the reductions in returns for milk powders resulting primarily from a weakening of international markets and the fact that intervention for skimmed milk powder is not available from September to February, leaving no floor in the market. This has been a very worrying development and, if sustained, could undermine the stability of this very important sector of the Northern Ireland agri-food industry. That is why, following a reduction in export refunds for milk powders by the EU Milk and Milk Products Management Committee, I asked my officials to lobby strongly at future meetings for these to be restored. Then at a recent meeting with other UK Agricultural Ministers I impressed upon Mrs Beckett

the need to exert pressure on the EU Commission to increase export refunds particularly for milk powders. Separately I also ensured that Commissioner Fischler was made aware of the importance of this matter for Northern Ireland. Our lobbying secured a positive outcome at recent Management Committee meetings, when export refunds for both whole milk powder and skimmed milk powder were increased. I sincerely hope that this will stabilise markets and provide the industry with confidence for the future.

Milk Prices

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement in relation to the current and forecast prices paid to dairy farmers for milk supplies and to give her assessment of the long-term impact that these prices will have on the industry. (AQW 1559/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am fully aware of the recent reductions in prices paid to producers for milk and have met with industry organisations to hear at first hand their views on the seriousness of the matter. In particular I have noted that in recent months there has been a significant drop in the average price for milk sold at the United Dairy Farmers monthly milk auction. This is a very worrying development and, if sustained, could undermine the stability of the dairy industry which makes a very important contribution to the Northern Ireland agri-food industry. I understand that these reductions resulted primarily from a weakening of international markets and a reduction in export refunds for milk powders by the EU Milk and Milk Products Management Committee. To help redress the situation I and my officials have been working hard to secure an increase in export refunds. In this respect I am pleased to say that our intensive lobbying both at national and EU level secured a positive outcome at recent Management Committee meetings, when export refunds for whole milk powder, skimmed milk powder and butter were increased. I trust that the increases achieved will bring some stability to the market and an improvement in prices paid to producers.

Fishing Vessels (Decommissioning) Scheme (NI)

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many companies or individuals have been contracted to decommission fishing vessels in 2002. (AQW 1583/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Fishing Vessels (Decommissioning) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2001 requires the owners of vessels approved for decommissioning grant aid to seek the Department's approval in writing of the intended date, place and proposed method of scrapping. Any

contract entered into to decommission such vessels is between the owner and the contractor. The Department does not hold information on the number of companies or individuals involved.

Decommissioned Fishing Vessels

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many fishing vessels are to be decommissioned in each of the following ports (i) Portavogie; (ii) Kilkeel; and (iii) Ardglass. (AQW 1584/01)

Ms Rodgers: Decommissioning grant aid of some £5 million was offered in respect of 34 vessels, 19 in the "whitefish" category and 15 in the "other" (nephrops) category. The split of successful vessels between the 3 Northern Ireland ports is (i) Portavogie 5; (ii) Kilkeel 20 and (iii) Ardglass 9. It should be noted that this merely reflects the bids received.

Printing Costs: W&G Baird

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail, for her Department and associated agencies, (a) the total amount of money paid to W & G Baird for printing over the last 5 years; (b) if the work was tendered and awarded to the lowest tender; and (c) if there was any variation from the price quoted to the actual cost paid. (AQW 1596/01)

Ms Rodgers:

- (a) £950
- (b) Yes
- (c) None

NI Fishery Harbour Authority: Development Projects

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 1237/01 to provide further detail regarding projects which the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority have put forward for Portavogie Harbour; and to give a timescale for the completion of these projects. (AQW 1646/01)

Ms Rodgers: In addition to a major works project to provide protection and repair to the quay wall at Portavogie, which is currently being evaluated and progressed by the Department, (estimated cost £520,000) the Authority is about to complete the new ice plant which cost £645,000 and was grant aided by the Department. The Authority has also just completed a project involving new lights and electrical upgrades costing £100,000 which is currently being evaluated for grant aid purposes.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Money Allocated for Gaelic Games

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 1338/01, to detail the breakdown of the figures for each of the individual Gaelic sports. (AQW 1572/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The figures are as follows:

LOTTERY CAPITAL

	1998/99 £m	1999/00 £m	2000/01 £m
Gaelic Football	3.160	1.320	1.587
Hurling	-	0.060	0.070
Camogie	-	-	-
Handball	-	-	-

LOTTERY REVENUE

	1998/99 £m	1999/00 £m	2000/01 £m
Gaelic Football	-	-	0.025
Hurling	-	-	0.037
Camogie	-	-	-
Handball	-	-	-

EXCHEQUER

	1998/99 £m	1999/00 £m	2000/01 £m
Gaelic Football & Hurling*	0.020	0.042	0.024
Camogie	0.005	0.010	0.015
Handball	0.003	0.003	0.001

*Regarded as one sport for Exchequer funding.

Funding under the Safe Sports Grounds scheme was allocated to Gaelic Football only.

EDUCATION

Invitations to Visit Schools

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education how many invitations has he received to visit the following categories of schools (a) Catholic Maintained; (b) State Controlled; (c) Integrated; and (d) Irish Medium. (AQW 1436/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): I have received the following number of invitations to visit these categories of schools:

(a) Catholic Maintained	109
(b) State Controlled	10
(c) Integrated	4
(d) Irish Medium	15

GCSE: School Leavers

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail, by Education Board, the number of pupils who left school in (i) 2000; and (ii) 2001 without attaining a grade in GCSE Mathematics and English. (AQW 1440/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Validated information on the GCSE grades achieved in specific subjects is not available in respect of school leavers.

The number of Year 12 pupils in schools in each Education and Library Board area in 1999/2000 who did not achieve a Grade G or above in both Mathematics and English by Summer 2000 is given below:

Belfast	1,045
Western	978
North-Eastern	952
South-Eastern	757
Southern	1,091

Figures for 2000/01 are not yet available.

Cost of Special Needs Education

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Education what is the cost of educating a child in a special needs school compared to the cost of educating a child with special educational needs at home. (AQW 1442/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is difficult to make a meaningful comparison between the two since children generally receive a maximum of eight hours tuition per week at home (this varies according to age) compared to a maximum of twenty five hours in school. Home tuition is also provided for as long as a child requires it, which is less than a year in many cases, and cannot provide classroom assistance or the many other facilities available in school. Bearing in mind these reservations the latest available costs are as follows: -

Type of Education	Range of Cost
Home Tuition	£2,500 - £6,270
Special School	£5,598 - £12,229

Home Tuition

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of children, in the school year

2000-01, that were tutored at home, and, of these (b) how many had special educational needs. (AQW 1443/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of children receiving home tuition varies throughout the school year according to the number convalescing after hospitalisation or suffering from long term illnesses etc. The average numbers in each Education and Library Board area in the 2000-01 school year were as follows:-

Board	No. on Home Tuition	No. with Statements
Belfast	110	11
Western	102	15
North Eastern	102	6
South Eastern	140	*
Southern	150	8

* not available

Surveys: Irish Medium Schools

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education what surveys have been conducted into the English literacy levels of children attending Irish Medium (i) primary schools; and (ii) secondary schools; and to publish the outcome of the surveys. (AQW 1471/01)

Mr M McGuinness: No surveys have been conducted into the English literacy levels of children attending Irish medium schools. The Key Stage 2 assessment outcomes in English, however, indicate no significant difference in performance between pupils in Irish medium schools and those in other schools. Numbers of pupils in Irish medium post-primary education are so few as not to permit meaningful comparison of Key Stage 3 outcomes.

Economic Appraisal: Down High School

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the timescale for the commencement of building work at Down High School in the event of a successful conclusion to the economic appraisal currently being carried out. (AQW 1494/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department is currently considering the South Eastern Education and Library Board's Economic Appraisal on the development needs of Down High School. When this is completed and planning of the project is sufficiently advanced, the school will be considered for a place in the capital programme in light of the resources available. At this stage, it is not possible to say when building work will start.

Economic Appraisal: Down High School

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the timescale to complete the SEELB's economic appraisal into the building project at Down High School. (AQW 1495/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Economic Appraisal prepared by the SEELB which recommends part refurbishment and part replacement of the existing accommodation at Down High is currently under consideration in my Department.

It is expected that the examination of the appraisal will be completed shortly.

Capital Funding: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how much capital expenditure has been allocated for (a) new school buildings; and (b) repairs and improvements to school buildings in North Down in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1508/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Capital funding of £12.0 million was allocated in 1999 for a new school building for Glenlola Collegiate and £4.8 million was allocated in 2001 for a new school for Clifton Special School. In addition, a new school for Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College, at a capital value of £15 million, was included in the Public Private Partnerships programme announced in 2001.

Capital funding for repairs and improvements to school buildings in the North Down constituency in each of the last 3 years is set out below.

1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002
£000s	£000s	£000s
773	1,985	1,913

Supply Teachers

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education what measures are in place to assist the Education Boards to maintain an appropriate number of supply teachers. (AQW 1517/01)

Mr M McGuinness: All employing authorities, including the Education and Library Boards, are responsible for employing teachers in the schools under their management. The Education and Library Boards, and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, have not employed supply teachers since the end of 1993/94 school year. In filling such temporary vacancies, it is generally the practice for their schools to maintain lists of locally available teachers, or to use the employment services of the Training and Employment Agency or the private sector.

O'Neill Memorial Primary School

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Education to outline his future plans for the O'Neill Memorial Primary School building. (AQW 1567/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I understand that the South-Eastern Education and Library Board has met the Board of Governors and the parents of O'Neill Primary School to discuss the decline in enrolments at the school, which currently stand at 16 pupils. The South-Eastern Board is keeping the future of the school under review.

W & G Baird

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to detail, for his Department and associated agencies, (a) the total amount of money paid to W & G Baird for printing over the last 5 years; (b) if the work was tendered and awarded to the lowest tender; and (c) if there was any variation from the price quoted to the actual cost paid. (AQW 1593/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department has not made any payment to W & G Baird over the last 5 years.

Hazelwood College and Hazelwood Integrated Primary School: Special Funding

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Education if he will ensure, as a matter of urgency, that Hazelwood College and Hazelwood Integrated Primary School receive the special funding he announced, in December 2001, on the same basis as Controlled and Maintained schools in areas of social need in North Belfast. (AQW 1684/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The aim of the Executive Package which I announced on 17 December 2001 is to provide immediate support for the schools in the area most affected by the unrest and to contribute towards the rebuilding of community relationships through the enhancement of youth service provision.

The schools were identified in light of discussions between the Department, the Belfast Education and Library Board, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, correspondence from schools and advice from the Education and Training Inspectorate.

The Executive Package is fully committed but my Department will consider any written representations made by schools in North Belfast in the event of further resources becoming available. A request for additional funding from Hazelwood Integrated Primary School is currently being considered.

No written representations have been made by Hazelwood College.

Hazelwood College and Hazelwood Integrated Primary School: Special Funding

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Education if he will ensure, as a matter of urgency, that Hazelwood College and Hazelwood Integrated Primary School receive the special funding he announced, in December 2001, on the same basis as Controlled and Maintained schools in areas of social need in North Belfast. (AQW 1684/01)

Mr M McGuinness [supplementary answer]: Further to my answer dated 28 January, written representations have now been received from Hazelwood College and will be considered by my Department.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Students Enrolled: University of Ulster, Coleraine

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in respect of the University of Ulster, Coleraine, to detail (i) the number of full-time students enrolled and (ii) the number of student spaces available in on-site halls of residence. (AQW 1396/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): In the 2000/01 academic year there were some 4,101 students enrolled on full-time higher education courses at the University of Ulster's Coleraine campus. As regards student accommodation, UU, in keeping with all UK universities, is an autonomous body entirely responsible for its own policies and practices, including student accommodation. My Department, in line with practice in other UK territories, does not fund the provision of such accommodation. However I am advised by UU that it currently provides 410 bed spaces on campus, with plans to increase these to 479, while a further 562 places are available at University-managed accommodation within the Coleraine, Portstewart and Portrush Triangle.

Mobile Classroom

Mr Kane asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she would consider the provision of a mobile classroom to complement the North East Institute of Further and Higher Education given the difficulties encountered with rural transport. (AQW 1427/01)

Ms Hanna: The decision to purchase a mobile classroom is entirely a matter for the North East Institute from within its existing resources.

Student Support Review

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what additional higher education places have been allocated to the University of Ulster at Magee Campus in response to the Student Support Review. (AQW 1463/01)

Ms Hanna: 1,000 additional higher education places will be introduced on a phased basis over the academic years 2002-03 to 2004-05 as part of the Student Support Review package. My Department is presently considering how these places will be apportioned within the tertiary education sector.

Managing Attendance Strategy

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what opportunities are being provided to ensure that we have enough staff to deal with health problems in the future. (AQW 1470/01)

Ms Hanna: The Department is actively involved in recruiting staff at different levels and is about to introduce a revised managing attendance strategy.

New Deal

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she will make a statement as to the effectiveness of New Deal in reducing unemployment among young people. (AQW 1483/01)

Ms Hanna: From the introduction of New Deal for 18-24 year olds in April 1998 in Northern Ireland, the number of young people in the New Deal target group claiming jobseeker's allowance (JSA) has fallen from 6,448 to 2,418 in December 2001, a decrease of 62%.

By contrast the total number of 18-24 year old people claiming JSA in Northern Ireland (target and non-target group) has fallen from 14,076 to 10,041, a decrease of 29% over the same period.

Focus for Work Initiative

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans she has to help the unemployed back into work in areas of acute social deprivation. (AQW 1497/01)

Ms Hanna: The recently announced Focus for Work initiative, the range of New Deal programmes, the work of the Taskforce on Employability and Long-Term Unemployment, which I chair, and my Department's closer working relationship with the Social Security Agency are examples of ways in which I am seeking to help the most disadvantaged back to work.

New Deal: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment she has made in relation to the impact of New Deal for young people in West Tyrone. (AQW 1502/01)

Ms Hanna: In West Tyrone the number of young people in the New Deal 18-24 target group claiming JSA has fallen from 510 in April 1998 to 208 in December 2001, a decrease of 59%.

By contrast the total number of 18-24 year old people claiming JSA in West Tyrone (target and non-target group) has fallen from 928 to 651, a decrease of 30%.

Access to Work (NI) Scheme

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps she is taking to assist people who are partially sighted to overcome barriers in employment. (AQW 1503/01)

Ms Hanna: Under the Access to Work (NI) scheme, a wide range of specific assistance is offered, including specialist equipment or modifications to premises or equipment required because of disability. In addition, the Department also offers the visually impaired job capability assessment, Employment Support and access to all other Departmental programmes. Information on this assistance is available from JobCentres and in audiocassette, large print and Braille formats.

Youth Unemployment: Jobskills

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress has been made in tackling youth unemployment. (AQW 1515/01)

Ms Hanna: For the purposes of quotation I have taken 'youth' to refer to the 16-17 group. Young people aged 16 and 17 years are not normally entitled to unemployment benefit but are guaranteed a training place for which they receive a weekly training allowance of £40. My Department provides that guarantee through the Jobskills training programme, which currently has in excess of 14,000 participants.

Rates of joblessness for 16 and 17 years olds in Northern Ireland have been measured by survey at around 5% for those not engaged in employment, education or training (Status 0). My Department is currently considering what additional provision needs to be made for these young people and has recently introduced a pilot within Jobskills to test alternative ways of re-engaging with this group.

New Deal

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what impact the New Deal programme has had on long-term unemployment in North Down.

(AQW 1537/01)

Ms Hanna: Since the introduction of New Deal in Northern Ireland in April 1998, the number of people in the New Deal 18-24 year old target group claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) in the North Down constituency has fallen from 196 to 80 in December 2001, a decrease of 59%. During the same period the number of people in the New Deal for the over 25 target group in the North Down constituency has fallen from 534 to 169, a decrease of 68%.

By contrast the total number of people claiming JSA in the North Down constituency (target and non-target groups) has fallen from 2042 to 1306, a decrease of 36% over the same period.

New Deal 50 plus

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps she is taking to reduce long-term unemployment in males aged between 50-64.

(AQW 1599/01)

Ms Hanna: New Deal 50 plus is available to people aged 50 and over who have been receiving specified benefits for 6 months or more. It offers help from a Personal Adviser, an Employment Credit and a Training Grant. In addition, New Deal 25+ offers work experience and training to eligible Jobseekers aged over 50.

New Deal

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how much her Department has spent in relation to the New Deal programme from its inception to date.

(AQW 1600/01)

Ms Hanna: From April 1998 to December 2001 the Department has spent over £75 million on New Deal. The total spend includes Departmental Running Costs of £20.7m.

New Deal

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what effect the New Deal scheme has had on long-term unemployment in South Belfast.

(AQW 1601/01)

Ms Hanna: From the introduction of New Deal in April 1998 in Northern Ireland, the total number of people in the New Deal target groups claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) in South Belfast has fallen from 1,267 to 354 in December 2001, a decrease of 72%.

By contrast the total number of people claiming JSA in South Belfast (target and non-target group) has fallen from 3,147 to 1,875, a decrease of 40%.

Postgraduate Studies in Human Rights

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action she proposes to take to ensure grant assistance is provided for students undertaking post-graduate studies in human rights.

(AQO 667/01)

Ms Hanna: Each year my Department makes available some £4 million to Queen's University and the University of Ulster for research and for certain approved courses of full-time study leading to higher degrees. The allocation of awards across the various disciplines is made on the advice of the Department's Postgraduate Advisory Board. It is then for the universities to allocate these awards to each faculty and to select, by competition, the students who will receive them.

Work Permits

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the process and criteria for the issue of employment permits in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1674/01)

Ms Hanna: Work permits in both Great Britain and Northern Ireland are issued under the Immigration Act 1971. In Northern Ireland they are processed by my Department using the same criteria as are used in Great Britain by the Home Office.

Work permits allow employers based in Northern Ireland to employ people who are not nationals of a European Economic Area country and who would not otherwise be entitled to work in Northern Ireland. The aim of the system is to strike a balance between enabling employers to recruit or transfer skilled workers from abroad and protecting job opportunities for workers resident in the European Economic Area.

Only an employer based in Northern Ireland (or a representative, such as a solicitor or other agent, acting on behalf of the employer) may apply for a work permit to employ a person to work in Northern Ireland.

A copy of the current guidance note for employers which gives a full explanation of the process and eligibility criteria used has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Work Permits

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail, by constituency, the number of employment permits issued in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 1675/01)

Ms Hanna: The information is not readily available in the form requested.

Information available from the 1 April 1999 is as follows:

Financial year	No of permits issued
1999/2000	412
2000/01	973
2001 to 23/1/01	950

Monitoring Rounds

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to explain (a) why her Department has released approximately £51 million in the monitoring rounds in this financial year; and (b) the steps she is taking to improve financial forecasting within her Department. (AQW 1707/01)

Ms Hanna:

- (a) The Department's release of expenditure budget in this year's monitoring rounds was £21.2 million.

This properly recognises that student loans are not expenditure but Capital Assets and the amount of £19.1 million allocated to the Department in monitoring rounds.

The principal sources of surrenders were New Deal and Jobskills. In New Deal reduced demand, staff shortages and non-notification of some eligible unemployed have led to lower participation this year. Reduced demand, a higher qualification standard leading to lower performance payments and unit cost reductions have enabled release of Jobskills budget.

- (b) As part of the Department's preparation for the Budget, Jobskills and New Deal budgets were reviewed. These two budgets decline respectively in the coming year compared to this year and they will be reviewed again both in year and during preparations for the Spending Review. Actual spend will continue to be led by demand which can rise as well as fall.

East Down Institute, Downpatrick: Funding

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when funding will be made available to replace the East Down Institute in Downpatrick; and to make a statement. (AQO 659/01)

Ms Hanna: No funding commitment can be given at this time. The scheme, which is considered a high priority by my Department, continues to be considered in the light of available resources, taking into account other priorities in the Further Education Sector. However, in

furtherance of the overall project the Department has funded the purchase of an adjacent site to the Institute in Downpatrick.

Jobskills

Mr R Hutchinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment she has made in relation to the 8-week extension to job skills training credits and the ability of participants to complete key skills qualifications. (AQO 704/01)

Ms Hanna: Jobskills frameworks involving the full range of key skills were only introduced from September 2001 and the 8-week extension to training periods, which applies from that date, was agreed after consultation with training providers. It is too early to fully gauge the ability of participants to achieve key skill qualifications. However in view of the representations made in respect of key skills I have decided, as a temporary arrangement, that young people who entered Jobskills in the 1999/2000 intake will be permitted to progress in their training without the Key Skills qualifications.

Research Assessment Exercise

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to comment on the ratings achieved by Northern Ireland universities under the Research Assessment Exercise. (AQO 694/01)

Ms Hanna: The Northern Ireland universities performed extremely well in the Research Assessment Exercise with results confirming that research undertaken is of world class quality. The work of over three-quarters of staff are in units rated as containing research of international standard. This is a significant achievement.

Springvale Project

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide a progress report on the Springvale Campus project in West Belfast. (AQO 690/01)

Ms Hanna: The University of Ulster and the Belfast Institute are working in partnership and with my Department to take the Springvale project forward. The outline business case for the Private Finance Initiative test of the main campus is due to be presented to the Department in February 2002. The expected date for completion of the construction of the Community Outreach Centre is February 2002. A full planning application has been lodged for the Applied Research Centre and the expected date of completion is May 2003. The second draft of the academic plan is being developed by the two institutions in support of the

initial objectives for the campus and will be available shortly for consultation. The responses from the community to the first draft of the plan provided valuable community perspectives which have been analysed and included in the second draft.

Adult Literacy Strategy

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when she intends to bring forward a strategy to address the levels of literacy and numeracy difficulties among adults. (AQO 692/01)

Ms Hanna: A Strategy paper aimed at improving adult literacy in Northern Ireland has been prepared and will be published for consultation in late February or early March.

Teacher Training Colleges: Capital Expenditure

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much has been spent on capital expenditure, in the last 5 years on (a) St Joseph's; (b) St Mary's; and (c) Stranmillis teacher training colleges. (AQO 689/01)

Ms Hanna: During the period April 1996 to March 2001, the Department provided £1,389,520 in capital funding to St. Mary's and £2,776,859 to Stranmillis. St Joseph's Training College ceased to exist in 1985 when it was amalgamated with St. Mary's to form a single site college on the Falls Road campus.

IT Graduates

Mr McFarland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment she has made in respect of the adequacy of the annual output of IT trained graduates and technicians relative to likely levels of demand in the electronics engineering sector. (AQO 685/01)

Ms Hanna: Recent research suggests that there is unlikely to be a shortage of IT graduates over the next 5 years, however there is a shortage of electronic engineers, particularly at the graduate and technician levels. My Department is addressing these shortages by increasing the number of higher and further education places, introducing a graduate engineering conversion programme and establishing Centres of Excellence in ICT and computing and electronics, including at North Down and Ards Institute of Further and Higher Education.

Timber Technology

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she will undertake to support training initiatives in the new timber technology. (AQO 699/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department supports training in timber technology at various levels across Further Education in Northern Ireland. In particular there is specialist provision at Higher National Diploma level at the Upper Bann Institute of Further and Higher Education. I will be meeting representatives of Magherafelt Business Forum in the near future to discuss the issue with them.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Moyle Interconnector

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the benefits to NI electricity consumers from the sale of electricity generated by the Moyle Interconnector to the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 1432/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): Traders using the Moyle Interconnector to transmit electricity from Scotland to the Republic of Ireland are required to pay interconnector capacity charges. Receipts from these charges are offset against the allowed revenue in respect of the use of its transmission system which NIE is entitled to recover from customers in Northern Ireland. This benefit to customers is expected to grow as the use of the interconnector increases.

Moyle Interconnector

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what capacity of electricity generated by the Moyle Interconnector is expected to be distributed (a) in Northern Ireland; and (b) in the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 1433/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Capacity on the interconnector is made available to the electricity market through publicly advertised capacity auctions conducted by the System Operator Northern Ireland under the supervision of the independent Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas (OFREG). The results of the initial auctions to allocate the energy equivalent of 125MW of capacity under the contract to NIE and third party rights to interconnector capacity were published by OFREG on 30 November 2001 and 13 December 2001 respectively and are available on the OFREG website. Successful bidders are entitled to sell the capacity purchased at auction to customers in Northern Ireland or elsewhere.

Broadband Telecommunications: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made in extending broadband telecommunications to West Tyrone.

(AQW 1446/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Telecommunications is a privatised and nationally regulated industry and the provision of broadband services is a matter for the telecommunication operators. However the Executive in the Programme for Government recognised the need for Government to work with the private sector to encourage the provision of broadband services widely across Northern Ireland.

There are a range of broadband technologies and each has to be considered in light of the case for use. My Department's e-Solutions Centre can provide guidance to companies on what is most appropriate. Satellite technology presents one means by which rural areas such as West Tyrone can obtain access to broadband services and I recently announced a programme of support for SMEs in rural areas to assist them with set-up and first year costs.

ADSL Broadband

Mr McMenamain asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 581/01, to explain the differential in the charge between ADSL fixed line and ADSL satellite broadband services.

(AQW 1459/01)

Sir Reg Empey: While OFTEL regulate the price of wholesale ADSL broadband, there is no regulation over the price of retail ADSL services. Consequently, in a privatised market, it is up to the operator to set what he feels to be the market-driven commercial rate. Broadband satellite technology is now sufficiently mature as to offer a viable, albeit more expensive, alternative to ADSL. Satellite telecommunications have the advantage of providing broadband services which are unrestricted by physical, geographic and terrestrial access restrictions, and are now available in Northern Ireland from a range of licensed telecommunication operators. At today's prices the cost of most satellite offerings available in Northern Ireland is approximately twice that for ADSL.

Attracting Manufacturing Business: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment he has made of attracting manufacturing business to West Tyrone.

(AQW 1464/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The downturn in leading global economies, exacerbated by the events of September 11, has resulted in an unprecedented reduction in available mobile inward investment opportunities. In addition the average size of projects in employment terms has also reduced significantly. Our competitors are also experiencing these factors. The technology

communications and aerospace sectors have been particularly badly affected. Levels of business investment have fallen steeply as companies have either postponed or abandoned proposals.

The depth and duration of the global downturn is uncertain although it is likely that investment opportunities will continue to be depressed in the longer term. This will lead to a smaller number of projects being secured in Northern Ireland as a whole. IDB has been encouraging potential investors to locate in areas such as West Tyrone but they have largely chosen to locate in or close to the Belfast and Londonderry conurbations where they believe the densities of population reduce their investment risk, particularly in terms of people.

However, IDB continues to explore new ways to promote inward investment from both new and existing investors into areas such as West Tyrone and is working particularly closely with local stakeholders to determine how best to market and promote the area.

Notwithstanding these challenges IDB recently announced the development of a new 30,000 sq. ft. Multi-Purpose Advance Building for Strabane which will be a valuable facility for prospective investors.

Previously, in December 2000 I announced a new £1.3m inward investment in Strabane. This was by the ROI based company, Fabplus Ltd, who purchased IDB's former advance factory in Strabane to manufacture sprinkler systems in a project that is expected to create 30 new manufacturing jobs.

In addition, through "Invest North West" IDB is co-operating closely with Industrial Development Authority (IDA) in a joint marketing initiative to promote the North West, including Strabane Council area as a single region for inward investment.

Hi-tech Business

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to encourage the growth in hi-tech businesses. (AQW 1465/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department's agencies are working closely with hi-tech businesses on an individual and sectoral basis to encourage growth and competitiveness. The range of measures being used include quality and export initiatives, incubation facilities, R&D, skills development and facilitating access to broadband telecommunications services. Activities to attract inward investment in this sector are also being actively pursued.

Bombardier in Montreal

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assurances did he seek

from Bombardier in Montreal in relation to the future of the aircraft industry in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1467/01)

Sir Reg Empey: At my meeting with Bombardier in Montreal I sought and obtained assurances that Bombardier was committed to maintaining a strong integrated design and engineering capability in Belfast which would enable it to compete effectively for new aircraft projects.

ADSL Satellite

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many people or companies have subscribed to ADSL satellite in Northern Ireland since its introduction. (AQW 1468/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In a privatised industry information relating to numbers of people or companies taking up ADSL or broadband satellite services is a commercially confidential issue. However OFTEL publish figures relating to the uptake of ADSL at a national level, which indicates that there are 130,000 users across the UK. OFTEL do not publish figures at a regional level, nor do they publish any figures relating to broadband satellite take-up.

Broadband satellite services from a number of suppliers have been offered in Northern Ireland since autumn 2001. Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU) understand the number of local companies using satellite broadband is currently less than 100. Since its launch on 15 January the Department's SME Broadband Satellite Programme has received requests for application forms from 48 companies.

Coats Viyella, Randalstown

Mr Clyde asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions he has had with the IDB in relation to the proposed local management buy-out at the Coats Viyella Home Furnishings plant in Randalstown; and to make a statement. (AQW 1479/01)

Sir Reg Empey: A procedure is in place with IDB to provide me with prompt notification on matters of public interest arising from events in the industrial sector and through that process I am fully aware of the details of this case.

On Wednesday 16 January officials met with senior Coats plc and local Dorma management and a process is underway with the objective of securing the best possible outcome for the business and its employees.

Trends in Inward Investment

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on changes in

trends in inward investment into Northern Ireland over the past 6 months, and to give his assessment of future trends. (AQW 1486/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The downturn in leading global economies, exacerbated by the events of September 11, has resulted in an unprecedented reduction in available mobile inward investment opportunities and their size, in employment terms, has also reduced significantly. These factors are also being experienced by our competitors. The technology communications and aerospace sectors have been particularly badly affected. Levels of business investment have fallen steeply as companies have either postponed or abandoned proposals.

The depth and duration of the global downturn is uncertain although it is likely that investment opportunities will continue to be depressed in the longer term. This will lead to a smaller number of projects being secured in the short to medium term.

Unemployment Figures: Omagh and Strabane

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the unemployment figures in both Omagh and Strabane District Council area in each of the last 4 years; and to make a statement. (AQO 668/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Claimant count unemployment figures for Omagh District Council in the last four years were 1,840 (December 1998), 1,324 (December 1999), 1,301 (December 2000) and 1,239 (December 2001). Corresponding figures for Strabane District Council were 1,768; 1,309; 1,368; and 1,257.

My Department and, once established, Invest Northern Ireland, will continue to work with companies in the area to promote further economic activity and employment.

Euro Preparations Forum

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what guidance and advice has been issued to businesses and the tourist industry in relation to the introduction of the euro currency. (AQO 662/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Northern Ireland Euro Preparations Forum has been actively implementing a regional euro preparations strategy designed to help local businesses, particularly SMEs, prepare to trade in the euro. Guidance and advice has been provided through articles in the local media, mailshots to businesses, regional roadshows, guidance publications and the Forum website (www.euroforum-ni.org.uk). A British Tourist Authority Booklet "The euro – A guide for small tourism businesses" has also been distributed to the local tourism and hospitality sector.

Trade Mission: Hong Kong and China

Mr R Hutchinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the uptake of any business opportunities as a result of the trade mission to Hong Kong and China in November 2001. (AQO 706/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Twenty-seven companies participated in the recent trade mission to China which I joined in Beijing. Information on the levels of business generated from the mission is still being gathered but to date a number of companies have reported actual sales of £2.14 million and potential sales of £8 million.

Inward Investment: Down Business Park

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what further action is being taken to promote inward investment to the Business Park located on the Belfast Road, Downpatrick.

(AQO 660/01)

Sir Reg Empey: From April 2001 to 31 December 2001 IDB arranged a further 5 visits by potential inward investor companies to Down Business Park; and discussions are currently taking place with property developers regarding the provision of modern flexible business space in the Park.

Introduction of the Euro

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the economic implications for businesses, particularly along the border as a result of the introduction of the Euro; and to make a statement.

(AQO 657/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The introduction of the euro provides both challenges and opportunities for Northern Ireland businesses.

Economically, local businesses now face a situation where exchange rate risk has been reduced, and where greater price transparency of goods and services exist across the eurozone. In border areas, where many NI businesses have long traded on a dual currency basis, the euro will in effect be simply replacing the Irish punt in business dealings.

The outlook for NI businesses, whose prices remain competitive and have prepared to trade in euro, is promising. The situation for local companies exporting to the eurozone would be further improved should the euro appreciate relative to Sterling.

Inward Investment

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the current position

of attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDO); and (b) how this may be affected by the creation of the new agency, Invest Northern Ireland (INI). (AQO 677/01)

Sir Reg Empey: (a) In this financial year there has been an unprecedented reduction in new inward investment opportunities, caused by the global economic downturn and the events of September 11; and (b) Invest Northern Ireland's strategic principles will include a continuing focus on inward investment with all the benefits which this brings to the local economy.

Harland and Wolff

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the current position regarding orders at Harland and Wolff. (AQO 673/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The current order book at Harland and Wolff is focused on construction of the two RoRo vessel contracts which is expected to maintain employment into the first quarter of this year; and the company is making substantial efforts to win new orders.

ENVIRONMENT

Enforcement Action: Buildings Demolished

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many buildings have been demolished as a result of enforcement action taken by the Planning Service since 1973.

(AQW 1439/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): The information requested is not readily available, and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost to my Department.

EuroBob

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any application he has made to the European Commission 'EuroBOB' campaign (IP/01/1694) against drink driving.

(AQW 1488/01)

Mr Foster: My Department has not made an application to the European Commission to implement the EuroBob concept in Northern Ireland.

The 'EuroBob' campaign is modelled on a character launched in Belgium in 1995 in a joint campaign by the Belgium Road Safety Institute (IBSR) and the Belgian Brewers' Association (CBB). The campaign aims to raise public awareness of the need to have a designated driver who does not drink and who is responsible for driving the rest of the party home safely.

In May 2001, the Belgian Minister of Transport wrote to Member States seeking their support in identifying non-government organisations as potential partners who might implement the EuroBob campaign, on a national basis in their country, possibly with EU funding. The letter noted that it was IBSR's intention to write to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents.

The UK replied to the effect that the Portman Group which, on behalf of the UK drinks industry, seeks to promote sensible drinking and reduce alcohol-related harm, has operated a similar scheme - known as 'I'll be Des' (for designated driver) - in the United Kingdom since December 1999. Contact details for the Portman Group were also provided.

I am not aware of any application having been made by a qualifying organisation to extend the EuroBob initiative to the United Kingdom.

General Exchequer Grant: Distribution

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any plans he has to introduce a deprivation factor in the formula used to distribute central government finance to local authorities. (AQW 1526/01)

Mr Foster: The proposed formula for distribution of the resources element of General Exchequer Grant contains measures to address the additional needs of district councils, generated by deprivation. The main adjusting factors introduced are the Noble indicators of income deprivation and employment deprivation.

This is in line with the Department's New Targeting Social Need (TSN) Objective No 6, contained in the New TSN Action Plan Report 'Making it Work', which was published last year.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Valuation and Lands Agency

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if the Valuation and Lands Agency is paid by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive at a flat rate per valuation or on a commission based on their final valuation. (AQW 1408/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): The Valuation and Lands Agency works on a full cost recovery basis. For the majority of its work the Agency calculates an individual charge for each case. The charge is calculated on the time taken, the grade of the staff involved and any expenses incurred.

The Agency carries out a limited amount of valuation work, for the NIHE, on a flat rate fee basis. That work

is in connection with the NIHE House Sales Scheme and was obtained by the Agency as a result of a competitive tendering process that required the bids to be made on a flat rate basis.

In no circumstances are the charges based on the final valuation.

Valuation and Lands Agency

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many properties were valued by the Valuation and Lands Agency in each of the last three years. (AQW 1409/01)

Dr Farren: The Valuation and Lands Agency is responsible for carrying out all rating valuations in Northern Ireland. It also carries out valuation and other related tasks for the Inland Revenue, Government Departments and public bodies. Collectively these are known as Client Services cases. The latter case work includes making valuations, but in many instances also includes giving advice on property matters, making estimates, carrying out economic appraisals, purchasing or leasing property and making assessments in connection with various forms of grant. In addition single cases may require valuations of several properties.

The statistics maintained by the Agency do not clearly distinguish between cases that involve only the provision of a valuation, those that involve other related tasks and those that involve multiple valuations.

I regret, therefore, that I am unable to answer the question as framed.

I have provided the following information on the numbers of cases that were processed by the agency, for the last 3 years.

	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Rating Cases	47,176	44,370	44,500
Client Services Cases	38,805	39,666	21,300

Valuation and Lands Agency

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many properties were valued by the Valuation and Lands Agency on a site only basis in each of the last three years. (AQW 1410/01)

Dr Farren: I regret that I am unable to provide the information requested.

The statistics recorded by the Agency are based on the numbers of cases completed and their relative complexity. The sub divisions recorded do not distinguish between valuations made on a site only basis and those that also involve buildings or other structures.

Valuation and Lands Agency

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether it is the policy of the Valuation and Lands Agency to value properties on the basis of future potential.

(AQW 1411/01)

Dr Farren: The Valuation and Lands Agency is obliged to carry out all its valuations in accordance with the relevant statutory provisions and Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors guidelines.

The majority of the valuations the Agency makes for its clients are assessments of open market value for compensation purposes or for purchases or disposals of public sector property in the open market. In these circumstances the potential of the properties involved is fully reflected in the valuations.

There are, however, some narrow exceptions to this general approach, particularly in the field of compulsory purchase compensation, where potential must be ignored if it arises as a direct result of the public sector scheme for which the property is being purchased.

Peace II: Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the action NIVT (Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust) is taking to ensure grants under the European Peace II Programme for terrorist victims is distributed fairly in each constituency area, specifically the Strangford constituency.

(AQW 1451/01)

Dr Farren: As an Intermediary Funding Body for the PEACE II Programme, the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT) will be responsible for ensuring that “the measures for which it is responsible are implemented in accordance with the requirements of the PEACE II Operational Programme”. Allocations under the Programme will be made in accordance with the selection criteria for the relevant priority and measure and not made on the basis of geographical location.

Under the PEACE II Programme all areas, groups and sectors will be afforded equal access to PEACE II funding. A number of agreed Horizontal Principles will govern the way in which PEACE II will be implemented and these Principles address equality of opportunity and balanced interventions.

Cervical Cancer Statistics

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, by Health Board area, the number

of deaths from cervical cancer recorded in each year since 1995.

(AQW 1498/01)

Dr Farren: The information requested on deaths resulting from cervical cancer (malignant neoplasm of the cervix uteri), by Health Board area, is presented in the table below.

ICD 9 Code 180 Malignant neoplasm of the cervix uteri	EHSSB	NHSSB	SHSSB	WHSSB	Northern Ireland
1995	10	5	3	1	19
1996	22	9	5	9	45
1997	13	4	1	8	26
1998	13	10	4	6	33
1999	16	11	4	5	36
2000	13	9	3	5	30

Physical Punishment in the Home

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in respect of the consultation document issued by the Office of Law Reform ‘Physical Punishment in the home - thinking about the issues, looking at the evidence’, to advise if the research of Doctors Robert Larzelere and Diana Baumrind was considered in preparing this document.

(AQW 1513/01)

Dr Farren: The results of Diana Baumrind’s research was considered by officials in preparing the consultation paper, “Physical Punishment in the home – thinking about the issues, looking at the evidence”. Two articles by Dr Robert Larzelere have been referred to officials by a consultee, and will be fully considered when policy is being formulated.

Departmental Expenditure Limits: Easements

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the easements identified by each Department in the June, September and December monitoring rounds in the current financial year.

(AQW 1519/01)

Dr Farren: The information requested, based on the easements declared within Departmental Expenditure Limits (DEL) for each Department, is set out in the table below.

In addition, details of departmental easements will be made available to Members in the course of each future Monitoring Round.

Department	Monitoring Round	Spending Area	Easement	£M 01/02
DARD	September	N/S Body: Foyle, Carlingford & Irish Lights	N/S Body – FC & ILC	-0.1
	December	Science Service	BSE Building	-1.7
		Food & Farm Policy	Aujesky's Disease	-0.2
			Beef Quality Initiative	-2.0
			Foot & Mouth-Charitable Funding	-0.2
			PVP Fees	-0.9
			Processing & Marketing (EU)	-2.8
		Red Meat Strategy	-0.3	
		Scrapie Eradication Programme	-2.0	
	Rural Development	Rural Development - Current	-2.5	
Total Department DARD				-12.6
DCAL	September	Ordnance Survey (NI)	OSNI – Additional Receipts	-0.4
	December	Libraries	Library Capital Receipt	-0.1
Total Department DCAL				-0.5
DE	December	Schools Recurrent – Schools	Deferment of Revised NI Curriculum	-0.7
			Threshold Payments to Teachers	-13.0
Total Department DE				-13.6

Department	Monitoring Round	Spending Area	Easement	£M 01/02	
DEL	June	Higher Education (inc Teacher Training)	Springvale Campus	-1.8	
	September	Student Support and Postgraduate Awards	Student Loan Subsidy	-5.8	
			Preparation for Work	Jobskills – Reduced Costs of Training	-8.6
		Higher Education (inc Teacher Training)	New Deal – Late implementation of progs.	-10.9	
			Skills Agenda	-0.5	
			Reduced Springvale Capital Costs	-0.9	
		December	Springvale Rec Costs	Springvale Rec Costs	-0.2
	Promoting Skills and Abilities			Projects Not Progressing As Expected	-0.8
	Preparation for Work		Jobskills	-2.8	
			New Deal – Backlog	-6.0	
	Staff Complement Below Budget		-0.8		
	EU Support for Training & Employment	EU-Delays over wind up/beg of progs	-1.3		
	Total Department DEL				-40.3

Department	Monitoring Round	Spending Area	Easement	£M 01/02	
DETI	September	Industrial Development Board	Land & Building – Reclasp Prog to DRC	-0.3	
		Development of Tourism	NITB Surrender from Reserve Fund	-0.1	
	December	Industrial Development Board	Asst. to Industries		-1.3
			Asst. to Shipbuilding-Loan Repayment		-2.0
			Industrial Development Grants		-20.6
		EU Support for Economic Development	European Regional Development Fund		-2.5
			European Social Fund		-0.8
	Total Department DETI				-27.7
	DFP	December	Financial Administration	Minor Easements	.0
				Reprofiling BSP Tech Assist Money	-0.3
Accommodation Services			Consultancy on Construction Projects	-0.4	
NI Statistics & Research Agency			Minor Easements	.0	
NI Statistics & Research Agency (GRO)			Minor Easements	-0.1	
Rate Collection Agency			Delay in Replacing Computer System	-0.3	
			Minor Easements	-0.1	
Total Department DFP				-1.2	

Department	Monitoring Round	Spending Area	Easement	£M 01/02
DHSSPS	June	Personal Social Services	Deferment of Nursing Home Care	-3.
	September	Fire Service	Fire Service – capital slippage	-1.0
*Total Department DHSSPS				-4.3
DOE	September	Driver and Vehicle Licensing NI	DVLNI Additional Receipts	-0.3
			Environment and Heritage Services	EHS Additional Receipts	-0.2
			Natural Heritage Current Expenditure	-1.0
			Non Industrial Salaries	-0.4
			Waste Management Grants to DCs	-1.0
		Planning Service	Planning Application Receipts	-0.3
	December	Driver and Vehicle Licensing NI	DVLNI Additional Receipts	-0.6
			Environment and Heritage Services	EHS European Funds	-0.6
			Natural Heritage Current Exp.	-0.4
		Planning Service	Planning Application Receipts	-0.3
Total Department DOE				-5.2

Department	Monitoring Round	Spending Area	Easement	£M 01/02	
DRD	June	Roads	Additional Car Parking Receipts	-1.0	
		Transport	NITHC Asset Disposal	-5.0	
	September	Water and Sewerage	Water – Additional Receipts	-0.4	
	December	Roads	Increased Income Car Parking Fees	-0.3	
			Increased Income from Land Sales	-0.5	
		EU Structural Funds (mainly Roads & Transport)	EU Community Initiatives	-0.6	
			Grants to DCs/Private Sector	-0.8	
		Water and Sewerage	Metered Water Excess Receipts	-1.0	
	Total Department DRD				-9.5
	DSD	June	NI Housing Executive	Additional Clawback Receipts	-15.0
Urban Regeneration /Community Dev.			Clawback from Foyle side Retail Dev.	-3.0	
September		NI Housing Executive	Additional Capital Receipts	-8.0	
		Urban Regeneration /Community Dev.	Laganside	-5.2	
December		Urban Regeneration /Community Dev.	Anticipated Reduced Legal Costs	-0.2	
Total Department DSD				-31.4	

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Fracture and Elective Orthopaedic Services

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to provide adequate resources for both fracture services and elective orthopaedic services in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board. (AQW 729/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): I am currently considering how to allocate my budget for 2002/03. I am aware of the need for further resources for these services and I will be pressing the case for further funding across the range of health and social services, in line with my strategic priorities.

Tá mé ag déanamh machnaimh faoi láthair ar an dóigh le mo bhuiséad do 2002/03 a dháileadh. Is eol dom an gá le haghaidh acmhainní breise do na seirbhísí seo agus beidh mé ag cur an cháis chun tosaigh ar mhaithe le maoiniú breise fud fad na réimse seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta, ag cloí le mo thosaíochtaí straitéiseacha.

September Monitoring: Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assistance will be available to the Ulster Community & Hospitals HSS Trust in relation to their projected budget overspend of £1.3 million for the Care in the Community Programme. (AQW 834/01)

Ms de Brún: Following the decisions on September Monitoring, the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust was allocated £1.2m to cover certain cost pressures. I now understand that the Trust's latest financial projections indicate a break-even position at the year end.

I ndiaidh na gcinní ar Mhonatóireacht na Samhna, cuireadh £1.2m ar fáil d'Iontaobhas Otharlann agus Pobail Uladh chun brúnna áirithe costais a chlúdach. Tuigim anois go léiríonn na tuartha is déanaí de chuid an Iontaobhais go bhfuil scéal meá ar mheá ann ag deireadh na bliana.

2002-03 Programme for Government

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding has been set aside to achieve the aims and targets as set out in the draft Programme for Government for Working for a Healthier People. (AQW 835/01)

Ms de Brún: The majority of the 2002-03 Programme for Government targets will be met from the Department's administration budget. This is because they relate to the conclusion of policy reviews, guidance and legislation.

Service development targets can only be set where there is funding to support them. In that connection, the extra £31.8m made available in the Revised Budget enables us to set the following new "Working for a Healthier People" targets:

- by March 2003, provide for access to cardiac surgery for an additional 150 people;
- by March 2003, provide for additional renal dialysis sessions treating 45 people on a thrice weekly basis;
- by March 2003, have initiated a programme of live donor transplants allowing 10-12 people each year to return to full health.

In addition, the "Growing as a Community" chapter of the Programme for Government contains my commitment to provide a further 1,000 community care packages targeted mainly at older people. That chapter also promises the introduction, in October this year, of free nursing care for nursing home residents. These too will be funded from the Revised Budget.

The full details of all the Department's targets will be settled in the context of my own budget decisions for 2002-03, which I shall be announcing shortly.

Bainfear tromlach na spriocanna den Chlár um Rialtas 2002-03 amach trí bhuiséad riaracháin na Roinne. Tarlaíonn sé seo as siocair go mbaineann siad le hathbhreithnithe polasaí, treoir agus reachtaíocht a chur i gcrích.

Ní féidir le spriocanna forbartha seirbhíse a leagan síos ach amháin nuair atá maoiniú ann chun tacú leo. Dá bhithín sin, cuireann an £31.8m a cuireadh ar fáil sa Bhuiséad Athbhreithnithe ar ár gcumas na spriocanna nua "Ag Obair ar son Daoine níos Sláintiúla" a leanas a bhreacadh síos:

- faoi Mhárta 2003, rochtain ar mháinliacht chroí do 150 duine breise a sholáthar;
- faoi Mhárta 2003, seisiúin bhreise scagdhealaithe dhuánaigh a sholáthar ag déanamh cóir leighis ar 45 duine trí huaire sa tseachtain;
- faoi Mhárta 2003, clár trasphlandaí bronnóirí beo a cheadódh do 10-12 duine gach bliain bheith i mbláth na sláinte arís.

Ar a bharr, istigh sa chaibidil "Ag Fás mar Phobal" sa Chlár um Rialtas tá an gealltanais s'agam chun 1,000 pacáistí cúram pobail a sholáthar aimsithe go príomha ar dhaoine níos sine. Gealltar sa chaibidil, leis, tabhairt isteach cúram altranais saor do chónaitheoirí tithe altranais. Beidh na cinn seo maoinithe ón Bhuiséad Athbhreithnithe.

Beidh na sonraí iomlána de spriocanna na Roinne socraithe i gcomhthéacs mo chinní buiséid féin do 2002-03, a fhógróidh mé ar ball.

Additional Funding: Ulster Hospital Community Trust

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how will she allocate the £13 million set aside for Care in the Community and specifically how much will the Ulster Hospital Community Trust receive. (AQW 1049/01)

Ms de Brún: As I have already indicated, the additional £13m referred to will, among other things, fund an extra 1,000 care packages targeted mainly at older people. These packages will be spread across the whole of the population here, including that of the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust. It will be for the Eastern Board, as it will be for all Boards, to determine the funding to be allocated to its individual Trusts.

Mar a thug mé le fios cheana, maoiníonn an £13m breise a ndearnadh trácht air, i measc nithe eile, 1,000 pacáiste cúraim aimsithe ar dhaoine níos sine go príomha. Beidh na pacáistí seo roinnte ar an phobal iomlán anseo, Iontaobhas Otharlann agus Pobail Uladh san áireamh. Faoi Bhord an Oirthear, mar a bheidh sé faoi gach Bord eile, an dóigh a ndéanfar cinneadh ar dháileadh maoinithe ar a chuid Iontaobhas aonarach.

Budget Allocations: Cancer Services

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding available for cancer services in the next financial year. (AQW 1245/01)

Ms de Brún: I have not yet finalised my budget allocations for 2002-03.

Níor chuir mé an dlaoi mhullaigh go fóill ar dhálaí mo bhuiséid don bhliain 2002-03.

Expenditure on Health Care in Hospitals

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what expenditure is provided for health care in hospitals as opposed to the level of expenditure on community care. (AQW 1348/01)

Ms de Brún: In 1999-2000 (the last year for which detailed figures are available), total expenditure on the Hospital, Community Health and Personal Social Services element of my Department's budget came to £1,340m. Of this, some £758 million was spent on services provided in hospital (including mental health, learning disability and hospital care for the elderly) while £582m was spent on services in the community.

Of the £758 million spent on hospital care, approximately £567 million was spent in caring for people in acute hospitals.

Sa bhliain 1999-2000 (an bhliain dheireanach a bhfuil figiúirí miona ar fáil) ba é £1,340m an méid iomlán a caitheadh ar ghnéithe Otharlainne, na Seirbhísí Sláinte Pobail agus Sóisialta Pearsanta de bhuiséad mo Roinne. Den mhéid seo, caitheadh £758m ar sheirbhísí soláthraithe in otharlanna (sláinte meabhrach, míchumas foghlama agus cúram otharlainne do sheandaoine san áireamh) agus caitheadh £582m ar sheirbhísí sa phobal.

Den £758m caite ar chúram otharlainne, caitheadh timpeall is £567m ar chúram do dhaoine i ngéarotharlanna.

Budget Allocated: Community Care

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what was the total budget allocated to community care in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1356/01)

Ms de Brún: In the years 1997-98 to 1999-2000, the last years for which detailed figures are available, expenditure on community services amounted to:

	£m
1997-1998	511
1998-1999	541
1999-2000	582

Sna blianta 1997-98 go 1999-2000, na blianta is déanaí a bhfuil figiúirí miona ar fáil, seo a leanas an méid iomlán a caitheadh ar sheirbhísí pobail:

	£m
1997-1998	511
1998-1999	541
1999-2000	582

Budget allocation: Home Help Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much of the total budget was allocated to the Home Help service in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1357/01)

Ms de Brún: Total expenditure on Home Help and Domiciliary Care in the years 1997-98 to 1999-2000 – the last years for which detailed figures are available – was as follows:

	£m
1997-1998	38.9
1998-1999	40.4
1999-2000	44.6

Seo a leanas an méid iomlán a caitheadh ar Chúram Chuidiú Baile agus ar Chúram Tí sna blianta 1997-98 go 1999-2000 – na blianta is déanaí a bhfuil figiúirí miona ar fáil:

	£m
1997-1998	38.9
1998-1999	40.4
1999-2000	44.6

Community Care: Budget

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to increase the budget for community care.

(AQW 1360/01)

Ms de Brún: Although detailed deployment of my budget for 2002/03 has yet to be announced, I announced broad parameters on 4 December 2001, including £12.9 million to pay for 1,000 extra care packages and other services in the community and a further £4.5 million to pay for nursing care in nursing homes. I shall also be considering the need for further investment in the range of residential, domiciliary, respite and day services for the elderly and other vulnerable people in developing expenditure proposals for the 2003/04 budgetary round.

Siúd is go bhfuil mionúsáid mo bhuiséid do 2002/2003 le fógart fós d'fhógair mé imlínte leathana ar an 4 Nollaig, 2001, lena n-áirítear £12.9 milliún le híoc as 1,000 pacáiste cúraim breise agus seirbhísí eile sa phobal agus £4.5 milliún breise le híoc as cúram altranais i dtithe altranais. Beidh mé ag breithniú an gá atá le tuilleadh infheistíochta i réimse seirbhísí cónaitheacha, sainchónaitheacha, seala agus lae do dhaoine scothaosta agus daoine soghonta eile agus tograí caiteachais á bhforbairt do bhabhta buiséid 2003/04.

Health Care Needs of the Homeless

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment she has made of the health care needs associated with homelessness.

(AQW 1392/01)

Ms de Brún: Homeless people are more vulnerable to infectious diseases, due in part to their less safe living environments. Surveys, here and elsewhere, have revealed high levels of mental illness among people living in temporary shelters and bed and breakfast accommodation. The 1997 Health and Wellbeing Survey demonstrated that living alone, living in hostels or living in housing with poor environmental conditions are related to higher likelihood of psychological illness. Surveys of people sleeping rough indicate that a significant number have complex needs and require support from housing, health and social services.

Statutory responsibility for addressing homelessness rests with Housing Executive under the Housing (NI) Order 1988.

The DHSSPS and the Boards and Trusts are an integral part of the Supporting People Strategy which is led by the Housing Executive and which will lead to the needs of vulnerable groups, including the homeless, being jointly identified and responses jointly commissioned.

A joint memorandum of understanding setting out agreed principles on co-operation has been signed by the Chief Executive of the Housing Executive and each of the four Health & Social Services Boards and they meet on a six monthly basis to address issues of mutual concern.

The Health and Personal Social Services and Housing Executive currently fund services for street homeless people and a peripatetic homeless support service in Belfast. This aims to ensure that homeless people can access appropriate health and welfare services.

HPSS staff from various disciplines are also likely to be involved in a planned Housing Executive initiative to carry out individual case assessment and follow up of long term homeless people living in hostels.

Tá níos mó seans ann go dtógfaidh na díthreabhaigh galair thógálacha, toisc, ar dhóigh, a dtimpeallachtaí cónaithe bheith níos contúirtí. Nocht suirbhéanna, anseo agus áiteanna eile, ardeibhéil tinneas meabhrach ar dhaoine ina gcónaí i lóistín sealadach agus i lóistín leaba agus bricfeasta. Thaispeáin Suirbhé Sláinte agus Dea-bhaile 1997 go bhfuil baint idir duine ina chónaí leis féin, i dteach ósta nó i lóistín a bhfuil droch-dhóigh orthu ó thaobh timpeallachta de agus dóchúlacht tinnis shíceolaíoch. Léiríonn suirbhéanna daoine ina gcodladh in áit gharbh go mbíonn riachtanais chasta ag líon suntasach acu agus go mbíonn tacaíocht de dhíth acu ó sheirbhísí tithíochta agus ó na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta.

An Feidhmeannas Tithíochta atá freagrach go reachtúil as tabhairt faoi dhíthreabhacht de réir Oird Thithíochta (TÉ) 1998.

Is cuid riachtanach iad an RSSSSP, na Boird agus na hIontaobhais de Straitéis chun Tacú le Daoine a bhfuil an Feidhmeannas Tithíochta i gceannas uirthi agus a dtiocfaidh comhathint riachtanais dhaoine soghonta, díthreabhaigh san áireamh, chomh maith le comhchoimisiúnú freagraí aisti.

Tá comh-mheamram tuisceana a leagann prionsabail chomhaontaithe amach ar chomhoibriú sínithe ag Príomh-Fheidhmeannach an Fheidhmeannais Thithíochta agus ag na ceithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta go léir agus bíonn cruinniú acu gach sé mhí le tabhairt faoi cheisteanna comhchúir.

Maoiníonn na Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Pearsanta agus an Feidhmeannas Tithíochta seirbhísí do

dhíthreabhaigh ar na sráideanna agus seirbhís thacaíochta do dhíthreabhaigh fhánacha i mBéal Feirste faoi láthair. Tá sé de chuspóir aige seo le cinntiú gur féidir le díthreabhaigh na seirbhísí cearta sláinte agus leasa shóisialta a fháil.

Is dócha go mbeidh oibríthe na SSSP ó réimsí éagsúla páirteach i scéim phleanáilte an Fheidhmeannais Thithíochta le measúnú a dhéanamh ar chásanna indibhidiúla agus le fiosrú a dhéanamh ar dhíthreabhaigh fhadtéarmacha a chónaíonn i dtithe ósta.

Agency Nurses: Sperrin Lakeland Trust

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the use of agency nurses within the Sperrin Lakeland Trust. (AQW 1393/01)

Ms de Brún: Sperrin Lakeland Trust employs agency nurses to supplement staffing on a short term basis when it has not been possible to recruit suitably qualified staff on short term contracts or the internal nurse bank cannot be utilised.

Fostaíonn Iontaobhas Speirín, Tír na Lochanna altraí gníomhaireachta chun foireann a fhorlíonadh ar bhonn gearrthéarmach nuair nach féidir foireann cháilithe chuí a earcú ar chonarthaí gearrthearma nó nuair nach féidir an banc altraí inmheánach a úsáid.

Diagnosis and Treatment of Cancer

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made on speeding up the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. (AQW 1394/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 1078/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 1078/01.

Specialist Medical Workforce

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what changes have been made to increase the recruitment of doctors in the Health Service. (AQW 1395/01)

Ms de Brún: As already indicated in my response to AQW 952/01 the specialist medical workforce is reviewed annually and numbers in training adjusted, resources permitting, to take account of the changing situation. In recognition of the current staffing position for consultant medical staff the number of medical students was increased in 2001 from 166 to 180.

In addition 15 Specialist Registrar posts and 7 Pre-Registration House Officer posts were created with effect from 1 August 2001.

My Department is also about to commence work on a comprehensive review of future medical workforce requirements. This review is expected to be completed by the summer of 2002 and will include an assessment of the training places required to meet service needs.

Mar a chuir mé in iúl cheana féin sa fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 952/01, déantar athbhreithniú ar an tsainmheitheal mhíochaine go bliantúil agus coigeartaítear líon na ndaoine in oiliúint, de réir na n-acmhainní, chun an t-athrú sa riocht a chur san áireamh. Mar aitheantas ar riocht na foirne maidir leis an fhoireann chomhairleach míochaine atá ann faoi láthair, méadaíodh líon na mac léinn míochaine ó 166 go 180 sa bhliain 2001.

Ina theannta sin, cruthaíodh 15 post mar Shain-Chhláraitheoir agus 7 post mar Oifigigh Tí Réamhchláraithe a thosóidh ó 1 Lúnasa 2001.

Tá an Roinn s'agamsa ar tí tús a chur le hobair ar athbhreithniú cuimsitheach ar riachtanais na meithle míochaine sa todhchaí. Táthar ag súil go gcríochnófar an t-athbhreithniú seo faoi shamhradh 2002 agus istigh ann, beidh measúnú ar na háiteanna oiliúna a bheidh de dhíth le riar ar riachtanais na seirbhíse.

Warfarin

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients are prescribed Warfarin as part of their coronary heart disease treatment in each Health Board area for the last three years. (AQW 1397/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not readily available in the form requested and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Níl eolas san fhoirm atá lorgtha ar fáil go héasca agus ní fhéadfaí é a fháil ach ar chostas míchuí.

Alzheimer's Disease: Respite Care

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to increase respite care for those suffering from Alzheimer's disease. (AQW 1401/01)

Ms de Brún: I recognise the importance of respite care in enabling all carers, including those who are caring for someone suffering from Alzheimer's disease, to fulfil their caring roles and I have already announced my intention to make funding available in 2002/03 to provide breaks for carers.

Aithním an tábhacht atá le cúram faoisimh le cur ar chumas gach feighlí, ina measc na daoine a thugann

aire do dhuine a bhfuil an galar Alzheimer air, a ról mar fheighlithe a chomhlíonadh agus d'fhógair mé an rún s'agam le maoiniú a chur ar fáil i 2002/03 chun sosanna a sholáthar d'fheighlithe.

MMR: Individual Vaccines

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to enable GPs to administer the combined measles, mumps and rubella vaccine as individual vaccines.

(AQW 1402/01)

Ms de Brún: I have no plans concerning the introduction here of single vaccines for measles, mumps or rubella. My Department continues to recommend the use of the combined MMR vaccine. This recommendation is strongly endorsed by the World Health Organisation on the grounds of the triple vaccine's record of safety and efficacy.

Níl pleananna agam maidir le tabhairt isteach vacsaíne aonaraí don bhruitíneach, leicneach nó don bhruitíneach dhearg. Molann an Roinn s'agam úsáid na comhvacsaíne MMR go fóill. Tacaíonn an tEagrais Sláinte Domhanda go mór leis an mholadh seo de thairbhe shábháilteacht agus éifeachtacht na vacsaíne triaraí.

Personality Disorders

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assistance is available within the Health Service for people suffering from personality disorders. (AQW 1404/01)

Ms de Brún: Assistance is available from individual primary care and mental health professionals, according to clinical need.

Tá cuidiú ar fáil ó ghairmithe aonair príomhchúraim agus sláinte meabhrach, de réir riachtanais chliniciúil.

Personality Disorders

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are currently receiving help for personality disorders and what plans she has to target this illness in the future.

(AQW 1405/01)

Ms de Brún: Statistical information for people receiving help for a specific diagnosis of personality disorder is only available for inpatients in mental health facilities. In 1998/99 (latest year available from the Mental Health Inpatients System) there were 446 people treated in inpatient units with a primary diagnosis. People with personality disorders access many other levels of service, including primary care, community

health and social services, outpatient and day care for a wide range of issues. There are no current plans to target personality disorder specifically.

Níl eolas staitisticíúil ar dhaoine ag fáil cuidithe d'fháthmheas ar leith neamhoird phearsantachta ar fáil ach ar othair chónaitheacha in áiseanna sláinte meabhrach. Sa bhliain 1998/99 (an bhliain is déanaí atá ar fáil ón Chóras Othar Cónaitheach Sláinte Meabhrach) cóireáladh 446 duine a raibh fáthmheas bunaidh déanta orthu in ionaid othair chónaithe. Faigheann daoine a bhfuil neamhord pearsantachta orthu leibhéil eile sheirbhísí mar aon le príomhchúram, seirbhísí sláinte pobail agus sóisialta, agus le cúram éisothair agus lae do réimse leathan fáthanna. Níl sé beartaithe faoi láthair díriú ach go háirithe ar neamhord pearsantachta.

Public Confidence: Health Service

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to instil public confidence in the Health Service.

(AQW 1406/01)

Ms de Brún: I am working in a planned, strategic way to build stronger, more effective and high quality services at primary, hospital and community levels. In addition, my officials are working on a day-to-day basis with staff in the service to develop solutions to immediate problems and I have been arguing strongly for the additional resources that are required to improve service provision.

In this context, I have established clear priority areas for the additional resources available to me in the coming financial year:

- I intend to introduce free nursing care for residents of nursing and residential homes from October next. I hope that this will remove some of the financial worry for this group of vulnerable individuals;
- I am committed to funding an extra 1,000 care packages over the course of 2002-03, targeted mainly at older people;
- I want to increase access for those who need hospital treatment, particularly cardiac surgery, renal and cancer services.
- I wish to see improvements in community services for people with mental illness or learning disability, so that they can enjoy more suitable living arrangements, outside hospital where that is appropriate.

Tá mé ag obair ar dhóigh phleanáilte, straitéiseach le seirbhísí ardcháilíochta a dhéanamh níos láidre agus níos éifeachtaí ar leibhéil bhunaidh, otharlainne agus phobail. Ina theannta sin, tá mo chuid oifigeach ag obair ar bhonn laethúil le foireann na seirbhíse chun teacht ar réitigh ar na fadhbanna láithreacha agus bhí

mé iarraidh go dian ar na hacmhainní breise atá de dhíth a fháil leis an soláthar seirbhíse a fheabhsú.

Sa chomhthéacs seo, leag mé réimsí soiléire tosaíochta síos le haghaidh gnímh:

- Tá sé ar intinn agam cúram altranais saor in aisce a thabhairt isteach do chónaitheoirí thithe altranais agus cónaithe ó Dheireadh Fómhair. Tá súil agam go maolódh sé seo an bhuairt airgid ar an dream daoine soghonta seo;
- Tá mé geallta do mhaoiniú 1,000 pacáiste breise cúraim i rith 2002-03, dírithe go príomha ar sheandaoine;
- Ba mhaith liom rochtain a mhéadú do na daoine sin a bhfuil cóireáil otharlainne de dhíth orthu, go háirithe máinliacht chairdiach agus seirbhísí duáin agus ailse.
- Is mian liom feabhsuithe i seirbhísí pobail a fheiceáil do dhaoine a bhfuil tinneas meabhrach nó míchumas foghlama orthu, sa dóigh go mbeidh cóiríocht mhaireachtála níos fóirsteanaí acu taobh amuigh den otharlann más ceart í.

Tuberculosis

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many cases of tuberculosis were recorded in the (a) adult population and (b) child population in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 1413/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

NUMBER OF CONFIRMED CASES OF TUBERCULOSIS NOTIFIED TO THE COMMUNICABLE DISEASES SURVEILLANCE CENTRE (CDSC), 1995 TO 2000

	Children	Adults	Age unknown	Total
1995	16	67	1	84
1996	10	62	7	79
1997	11	53	1	65
1998	13	48	0	61
1999	9	49	1	59
2000	3	48	1	52

Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos.

LÍON NA GCÁSANNA DEIMHNITHE EITINNE A CUIREADH IN IÚL DON IONAD FAIRE GALAR TEAGMHÁLACH (IFGT) 1995 GO 2000

	Páistí	Aosaigh	Ní fios cén Aois	Iomlán
1995	16	67	1	84
1996	10	62	7	79
1997	11	53	1	65
1998	13	48	0	61

	Páistí	Aosaigh	Ní fios cén Aois	Iomlán
1999	9	49	1	59
2000	3	48	1	52

Patient and Client Charter Standard

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there is an upper limit on the waiting time period between referral from a GP to the initial assessment appointment with a specialist consultant. (AQW 1415/01)

Ms de Brún: The patient and client charter standard introduced in 1992 states that in normal circumstances patients should not have to wait more than three months for an outpatient assessment.

In June 2000 I announced that a maximum wait of two weeks should apply to urgent suspected breast cancer patients referred by GPs.

Léiríonn an caighdeán cairte othar agus cliant a tugadh isteach i 1992 nár chóir d'othair fanacht níos mó ná trí mhí le haghaidh measúnú othair sheachtaraigh faoi ghnáthchúinsí.

I Meitheamh na bliana 2000 d'fhógair mé gur chóir aga feithimh coiscise ar a mhéad a chur i bhfeidhm ar chásanna práinneacha má shíltear go bhfuil ailse chíce ar othar a d'atreoraigh GDanna.

Asperger's Syndrome

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what financial assistance will she offer to help improve services dealing with Asperger's Syndrome in adults. (AQW 1416/01)

Ms de Brún: Services for adults with Asperger's Syndrome are provided under the Mental Health and Learning Disability Programmes of Care. In 1999/2000 expenditure on these services totalled £218m. In 2000/01 I secured an additional £1m to provide an extra 35,000 community consultations under the Mental Health Programme of Care. I am currently considering the allocation of the budget available to me for 2002/2003.

Tá seirbhísí d'othair a bhfuil Siondróm Asperger orthu curtha ar fáil faoi Chláir Chúraim um Shláinte Meabhrach agus Míchumas Foghlama. I 1999/2000 ba é £218m suim iomlán an chaiteachais ar na seirbhísí seo. I 2000/01 fuair mé £1m breise chun 35,000 comhairliúcháin pobail a sholáthar faoi Chláir Chúraim um Shláinte Meabhrach. Tá mé faoi láthair ag déanamh machnaimh ar dháileadh an bhuiséid ar fáil agam i 2002/2003.

Asperger's Syndrome

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the diagnostic and support services available to adults with Asperger's Syndrome in each of the Health Board areas.

(AQW 1417/01)

Ms de Brún: Services for adults with Asperger's Syndrome are provided under the Learning Disability or Mental Health Programmes of Care. Professional awareness of Autistic Spectrum Disorders has developed in recent years, and this is helping to inform service development. All Health and Social Services Boards report that they are developing services for those with Autistic Spectrum Disorders through a range of projects and pilots.

Tá seirbhísí d'othair a bhfuil Siondróm Asperger orthu curtha ar fáil faoi Chláir Chúraim um Sláinte Meabhrach agus Míchumas Foghlama. Forbraíodh feacht phróifisiúnta ar Mhí-oird Speictrim Uathaigh le blianta beaga anuas agus tá sin ag cuidiú le dul i bhfeidhm ar fhorbairt seirbhíse. Deir gach Bord Sláinte agus Serbhísí Sóisialta go bhfuil siad ag forbairt seirbhísí dóibh siúd a bhfuil Mí-oird Speictrim Uathaigh orthu trí réimse tionscadal agus treoirthionscadal.

Asperger's Syndrome

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (a) children; and (b) adults who are currently receiving care for Asperger's Syndrome. (AQW 1418/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not held centrally.

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh i dtaisce go lárnach.

Awaiting Nursing or Residential Care Beds

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people in each Community Health and Social Service Trust, are awaiting a placement in nursing or residential care and are currently (a) in an acute hospital bed; (b) in a psychiatric hospital bed; and (c) in the community.

(AQW 1430/01)

Ms de Brún:

(a) This information is detailed in the table below.

PATIENTS IN ACUTE HOSPITAL BEDS AWAITING NURSING OR RESIDENTIAL HOME CARE PACKAGES, BY TRUST AND TYPE OF PACKAGE, OCTOBER 2001

Provider Trust	Nursing	Residential	Total
Royal Group of Hospitals	25	3	28
HSS Trust			

Provider Trust	Nursing	Residential	Total
Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust	12	4	16
Greenpark HSS Trust	9	3	12
Ulster Community and Hospitals HSS Trust	39	13	52
Down Lisburn HSS Trust	7	1	8
Mater Hospitals HSS Trust	5		5
Causeway HSS Trust	26	3	29
United Hospitals HSS Trust	24	15	39
Craigavon Group Hospitals HSS Trust	44	4	48
Newry and Mourne HSS Trust	8	2	10
Armagh and Dungannon HSS Trust	18		18
Altnagelvin Area Hospitals HSS Trust	12	1	13
Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust	5		5
Total	234	49	283

(b) This information is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

(c) This information is detailed in the table below.

PATIENTS IN THE COMMUNITY AWAITING NURSING OR RESIDENTIAL HOME CARE PACKAGES, BY TRUST AND TYPE OF PACKAGE, 30 SEPTEMBER 2001

Trust	Nursing	Residential	Total
N & W Belfast	6	8	14
S & E Belfast	7	10	17
Down Lisburn	2	29	31
Ulster Community & Hospitals	3	14	17
Causeway	29	55	84
Homefirst	12	57	69
Armagh & Dungannon	20	3	23
Craigavon & Banbridge	44	16	60
Newry & Mourne	25	3	28
Foyle	68	14	82
Sperrin Lakeland	0	1	1
Total	216	210	426

(a) Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos.

OTHAIR I NGÉARLEAPACHA OTHARLAINNE AG FANACHT LE PACÁISTÍ ALTRANAIS NÓ CÚRAIM CHÓNAITHE, DE RÉIR IONTAOBHAIS AGUS CINEÁL PACÁISTE, DEIREADH FÓMHAIR 2001

Iontaobhas Soláthraí	Altranas	Cónaithe	Iomlán
Iontaobhas SSS An Ghrúpa Ríoga Otharlann	25	3	28
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	12	4	16
Iontaobhas SSS na Páirce Glaise	9	3	12
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlanna Pobail Uladh	39	13	52
Iontaobhas SSS an Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach	7	1	8
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann an Mater	5		5
Iontaobhas SSS an Chlocháin	26	3	29
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Aontaithe	24	15	39
Iontaobhas SSS Grúpa Otharlann Craigavon	44	4	48
Iontaobhas SSS an Iúir & Mhúrn	8	2	10
Iontaobhas SSS Ard Mhacha agus Dhún Geanainn	18		18
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlanna Ceantar Alt na nGealbhan	12	1	13
Iontaobhas SSS Thír Lochanna Speirín	5		5
Iomlán	234	49	283

(b) Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil go héasca agus ní féidir é a chur ar fáil ach ar chostas díréireach.

(c) Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos.

OTHAIR SA PHOBAL AG FANACHT LE PACÁISTÍ ALTRANAIS NÓ CÚRAIM CHÓNAITHE DE RÉIR IONTAOBHAIS AGUS CINEÁL PACÁISTE, 30 MEÁN FÓMHAIR 2001

Iontaobhas	Altranas	Cónaithe	Iomlán
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	6	8	14
Béal Feirste Theas agus Thoir	7	10	17
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	2	29	31
Otharlanna Pobail Uladh	3	14	17
An Clochán	29	55	84
Homefirst	12	57	69
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	20	3	23
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	44	16	60
An tIúr & Mhúrn	25	3	28
An Feabhal	68	14	82
Tír Lochanna Speirín	0	1	1
Iomlán	216	210	426

Accident and Emergency Ambulance: Carrickfergus

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to allocate a dedicated accident and emergency ambulance for the new ambulance station at Carrickfergus.

(AQW 1431/01)

Ms de Brún: Since January 2002, the Ambulance Service has deployed an Accident and Emergency Ambulance at peak times at the new ambulance outpost in Carrickfergus. The Ambulance Service will be monitoring and assessing the impact of this new arrangement on response times over the next 6 months.

Ó Eanáir 2002, bhain an tSeirbhís Otharcharr úsáid as Otharcharr Timpistí agus Éigeandálaí ag buaicuaireanta san ionad nua otharcharr i gCarraig Mhic Fhearghais. Beidh an tSeirbhís Otharcharr ag déanamh monatóireachta agus measúnaithe ar thionchar an tsocrúithe nua seo ar amanna freagartha thar na 6 mí seo chugainn.

Mammogram Screening Units

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many mammogram screening units used in Health Service hospitals are over 10 years old.

(AQW 1441/01)

Ms de Brún: There are fifteen fixed and four mobile mammography screening units used in the Health Service here. Of these, nine fixed units are over 10 years old. A tendering exercise for the purchase of six new fixed units is nearing completion.

Tá cúig cinn déag d'aonaid scrineála mamagrafacha socraithe agus ceithre cinn soghluaiste á n-úsáid sa tSeirbhís Sláinte anseo. Tá naoi gcinn de na haonaid shocraithe os cionn 10 mbliana d'aois. Tá cleachtadh tairiscintí do cheannach sé cinn d'aonaid shocraithe nua beagnach críochnaithe.

Grants Paid to Organisations

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, in each of the last 3 years, the amount of grant aid paid to the following organisations (a) Family Planning Association (NI); (b) The Brook Advisory Centre; (c) Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child; and (d) Life Pregnancy Care.

(AQW 1447/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is as follows:

	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Family Planning Association (NI)	£63,156	£58,467	£73,416

	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
The Brook Advisory Centre	£1,875	£10,000	£6,450
Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child	None	None	None
Life Pregnancy Care	£17,952	£17,499	£20,547

Seo a leanas an t-eolas iarrtha:

	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Cumann Pleanáil Clainne (TÉ)	£63,156	£58,467	£73,416
Ionad Comhairle Brook	£1,875	£10,000	£6,450
An Cumann um Chosaint an Linbh gan Breith	Náid	Náid	Náid
Cúram Iompar Clainne Life	£17,952	£17,499	£20,547

Financial Help: Medical Students

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in view of the shortage of junior doctors, what steps are being taken to provide financial help to encourage individuals to enter the medical profession.

(AQW 1453/01)

Ms de Brún: At present there are no reported difficulties in filling university places with students who wish to study for the medical profession.

The specialist medical workforce is reviewed annually and the numbers in training are adjusted, resources permitting, to take account of the changing situation. In recognition of the current staffing position for the medical profession, the intake of medical students was increased in 2001 from 166 to 180.

Faoi láthair níl aon tuairisc go bhfuil deacrachtaí maidir le háiteanna ollscoile a líonadh i gcás mic léinn ar mian leo dul le gairm na dochtúireachta.

Déantar athbhreithniú gach bliain ar an bhfórsa oibre sainliachta agus déantar an líon daoine a bhíonn faoi oiliúint a choigeartú, má ligeann acmhainní sin a dhéanamh, chun na himthosca a bhíonn ag athrú a ghlacadh san áireamh. In aitheantas ar an staid foirme láithreach do ghairm na ndochtúirí ardaíodh an líon mic léinn a glacadh isteach in 2001 ó 166 go 180.

Visit to Downe Hospital: Media Interviews

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she received invitations for interviews from the local press during her recent visit to Downe Hospital on 10 January 2002.

(AQW 1462/01)

Ms de Brún: On Thursday 10 January 2002, I visited the Downe Hospital and the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital at the invitation of the Downe Lisburn Trust.

The visit was part of my ongoing programme of visits to hospitals and other health and social care facilities.

As their purpose is to meet and hear from staff and to thank them for their commitment and hard work, these visits do not normally include interviews with the media. This was made clear to all media outlets before my visit to Downpatrick.

However, during the week of the visit, I was interviewed a number of times by the media on a range of issues relating to current pressures affecting a number of hospitals here.

Thug mé cuairt ar Otharlann an Dúin agus ar Otharlann Mháithreachais Dhún Pádraig Déardaoin 10 Eanáir 2002 ar iarratas Iontaobhas an Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach. Bhí an chuairt mar chuid den tsraith reatha chuairteanna s'agamsa ar otharlanna agus ar áiseanna eile sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta.

Toisc gurb é cuspóir na gcuairteanna seo bualadh agus éisteacht leis an fhoireann agus buíochas a ghabháil leo as a ndualgais agus as a n-obair dhian, ní bhíonn agallamh leis na meáin le linn na gcuairteanna sin de ghnáth. Cuireadh é seo in iúl go soiléir do na meáin uile roimh an chuairt s'agam ar Dhún Pádraig. Cuireadh in iúl dóibh fosta go bhféadfaidís grianghrafadóir a chur amach dá mian leo.

Bíodh sin mar atá, le linn sheachtain na cuairte, chuir na meáin agallamh orm roinnt uaireanta faoi réimse ceisteanna a bhain leis na brúnna reatha ar roinnt otharlann anseo.

Bi-Lingual Policy

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a breakdown of the expenditure to implement her bi-lingual policy in each year since her Ministerial appointment.

(AQW 1466/01)

Ms de Brún: The cost of translations into Irish, Chinese, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi and Ulster Scots and the publication costs for public notices in Irish is as follows:

1999/00	£16,896.49
2000/01	£53,115.84
2001/02 (to Dec 2001)	£111,626.85

Is é a leanas costas na n-aistriúchán go Gaeilge, Sínis, Urdúis, Hiondúis, Beangailis, Puinseabhis agus Ultais móide costais foilsitheoireachta le haghaidh fógraí poiblí i nGaeilge:

1999/00	£16,896.49
2000/01	£53,115.84
2001/02 (go Nollaig 2001)	£111,626.85

Homefirst community Trust: Occupational Therapy

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 495/01 and AQW 691/01, to outline the average time taken to commence an occupational therapy priority assessment within Homefirst Community HSS Trust in (a) Carrickfergus; (b) Larne; and (c) Newtownabbey.

(AQW 1472/01)

Ms de Brún: Homefirst Community Trust advises that in the Larne and Carrickfergus areas the occupational therapy service is managed as one team. Assessment of the most urgent cases, that is people who are deemed to be at high risk by content of referral, commences within two working days of referral. Assessment of other priority cases commences within three to four months of referral.

In Newtownabbey, assessment of the most urgent cases commences within two working days. Assessment of other priority cases commences within six to seven months of referral.

Molann Iontaobhas Pobail Homefirst, go mbeidh an tseirbhís theiripe saothair i Latharna agus i gCarraig Mhic Fhearghais faoi stiúir aon fhoireann amháin. Tosaíonn measúnú ar na cásanna is práinní, is é sin na daoine a mheastar go bhfuil siad i mbaol mór de réir sonraí an atreoraíthe, laistigh de dhá lá oibre den atreorú. Tosaíonn measúnú ar chásanna práinneacha eile laistigh de thrí nó cheithre mhí den atreorú.

I mBaile na Mainistreach, tosaíonn measúnú ar na cásanna is práinní laistigh de dhá lá oibre. Tosaíonn measúnú ar chásanna práinneacha eile laistigh de sé go seacht mí den atreorú.

Ambulance Service Response Times

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the current Northern Ireland ambulance performance rates for calls made within 8 minutes, for each local constituency.

(AQW 1474/01)

Ms de Brún: Ambulance Service response times are not recorded by local government district constituency area. The following table is a breakdown of response times by each ambulance station over the quarter ending 31 December 2001. The Department is currently consulting on the implementation of changes to the Ambulance Service to improve response times.

Station	Response at scene within 8 minutes		
	Total Calls	Number calls	% of total
Eastern Board Area			
Ardoyne	1898	1355	71.4
Purdysburn	732	305	41.7
Templemore Av.	1732	1187	68.5
Broadway	2616	1376	52.6
Newtownards	1882	790	42.0
Downpatrick	725	258	35.6
Lisburn	1113	630	56.6
Western Board Area			
Limavady	216	97	44.9
Altnagelvin	1299	778	59.9
Strabane	222	111	50.0
Castledearg	81	30	37.0
Omagh	373	199	53.4
Erne	393	178	45.3
Northern Board Area			
Antrim	501	291	58.1
Ballymena	740	336	45.4
Cookstown	289	147	50.9
Magherafelt	347	126	36.3
Ballymoney	225	74	32.9
Coleraine	538	254	47.2
Ballycastle	111	49	44.1
Whiteabbey	1161	541	46.6
Larne	470	248	52.8
Southern Board Area			
Craigavon	857	260	30.3
Banbridge	151	46	30.5
Armagh	336	141	42.0
Dungannon	418	161	38.5
Newry	700	377	53.9
Kilkeel	137	69	50.4

Ní dhéanann toghcheantar dúiche rialtais áitiúil agáí freagartha Seirbhís Otharchairr a thaifeadadh. Is é mionsonrú ar agáí freagartha de réir gach stáisiún otharchairr thar an cheathrú ag críochnú ar 31 Nollaig 2001 an tábla a leanas. Tá an Roinn ag dul i gcomhairle faoi chur i gcrích athruithe don tSeirbhís Otharchairr chun agáí freagartha a fheabhsú.

Stáisiún	Freagairt ar laithreán laistigh de 8 nóiméad		
	Glaonna Iomlána	Líon Glaonna	% den Iomlán
Bordcheantar an Oirthir			
Ard Eoin	1898	1355	71.4
Purdysburn	732	305	41.7
Ascaill an Teampaill Mhóir	1732	1187	68.5
Gráinseach Iúir	2616	1376	52.6
Baile Nua na hArda	1882	790	42.0
Dún Pádraig	725	258	35.6
Lios na gCearrbhach	1113	630	56.6
Bordcheantar an Iarthair			
Léim an Mhadaidh	216	97	44.9
Alt na nGealbhan	1299	778	59.9
An Srath Bán	222	111	50.0
Caisleán na Deirge	81	30	37.0
An Omaigh	373	199	53.4
An Éirne	393	178	45.3
Bordcheantar an Tuaiscirt			
Aontroim	501	291	58.1
Baile Meánach	740	336	45.4
An Chorr Chríochach	289	147	50.9
Machaire Fíolta	347	126	36.3
Baile Monaidh	225	74	32.9
Cúil Raitthin	538	254	47.2
Baile an Chaistil	111	49	44.1
An Mhainistir Fhionn	1161	541	46.6
Latharna	470	248	52.8
Bordcheantar an Deiscirt			
Craigavon	857	260	30.3
Droichead na Banna	151	46	30.5
Ard Mhacha	336	141	42.0
Dún Geanainn	418	161	38.5
Iúr Cinn Trá	700	377	53.9
Cill Chaoil	137	69	50.4

Flu Immunisation Campaign

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will make a statement on the progress of this year's flu immunisation campaign. (AQW 1482/01)

Ms de Brún: Once again my Department's flu immunisation campaign has met with a very good public response. The target uptake rate of 70% for the over-65 population was met by the end of November

and I expect, therefore, that the final uptake figure, due in mid- February, will show that this target has been exceeded. In addition the figures also show that over 80,000 patients in the under 65 “at risk category” had also received the vaccine by the end of November.

Arís, chuir an pobal fáilte mhaith roimh fheachtas imdhíonta fliú mo Roinne. Baineadh an spriocráta imdhíonta de 70% de dhaoine níos sine ná 65 bliain d’aois amach faoi dheireadh mhí na Samhna, agus ta mé ag súil, mar sin de, go léireoidh an figiúr deireanach imdhíonta, atá le heisiúint i lár mhí Feabhra, gur sáraíodh an sprioc seo. Ina theannta sin, léiríonn na figiúirí fosta go bhfuair breis agus 80,000 othar faoi 65 bliain d’aois agus a bhí sa chatagóir ‘i mbaol’ an vacsaín faoi dheireadh mhí na Samhna.

Health Inequalities: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in addressing health inequalities in West Tyrone. (AQW 1484/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department is taking a number of steps to address health inequalities. These include work to develop an all-embracing strategy on public health, “Investing for Health” which is due to be published shortly; actions to target social need and social exclusion, on which the Sperrin Lakeland Trust is currently consulting; the allocation of resources to the Western Board to better reflect the current health and social care needs of its area; and a programme of research is being planned to support the development of policies and services aimed at helping those in greatest need.

The Western Board and Trusts are also implementing a number of local initiatives to address inequalities, including a community development strategy on women’s health, actions to address teenage sexual health and support for local drug and alcohol initiatives through the provision of grants and other support.

Tá na Roinn s’agam ag tabhairt roinnt céimeanna le dul i ngleic le héagothromaíochtaí sláinte. Ina measc seo tá obair le straitéis chuimsitheach ar shláinte phoiblí a fhorbairt, “Infheistíocht sa tSláinte” atá le foilsiú ar ball; gníomhartha le riachtanais shóisialta agus eisiámh sóisialta a aimsiú, a bhfuil Iontaobhas Thír Lochanna Speirín ag dul i gcomhairle faoi; dáileadh áiseanna ar Bhord an Iathair chun riachtanais shláinte agus shóisialta an cheantair faoi láthair a léiriú níos fearr; agus táthar ag pleanáil clár taighde le tacú le forbairt polasaithe agus seirbhísí atá dírithe orthu siúd is mó faoi mhíbhuntáiste.

Tá Bord agus Iontaobhais an Iarthair ag cur roinnt tionscnamh áitiúil i ngníomh le dul i ngleic le héagothromaíochtaí, straitéis forbartha ar shláinte na

mhan ina measc, gníomhartha le dul i ngleic le sláinte ghnéasach déagóirí agus tacaíocht do thionsnaimh áitiúla drúgaí agus alcóil trí sholáthar deontas agus tacaíochta eile.

Cancer Prevention

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans are in place to increase preventative action to help reduce cancer rates. (AQW 1499/01)

Ms de Brún: Cancer prevention is being addressed through a range of initiatives. Smoking is responsible for one in three of all cancer deaths here and my Department is co-ordinating the development of an action plan to deter young people from adopting the habit and to help smokers to quit. The plan will be issued for consultation in the Spring.

My Department has also published a melanoma strategy to advise people about the dangers of over exposure to the sun, and a food and nutrition strategy, which stresses the importance of a healthy diet. Excellent screening programmes are in place to reduce the risk of cervical cancer.

Táthar ag tabhairt faoi chosc ailese trí réimse tionscnamh. Caitheamh tobac is ea is cúis le bás amháin as trí bhás ó ailese anseo agus tá an Roinn s’agam sa ag comhordú forbairt plean gnímh chun daoine óga a chur ón nós a dhéanamh agus chun cuidiú le caiteoirí tobac éirí as. Eiseofar an plean le haghaidh comhairlithe san Earrach.

D’fhoilsigh an Roinn s’agam sa straitéis mheileanóma fosta chun comhairle a thabhairt do dhaoine faoin bhaol trí bharráíocht bholg le gréin a dhéanamh agus faoi straitéis bhia agus chothaithe, a chuireann béim ar thábhacht aiste sláintiúla bia. Tá cláir scrúduithe ar dóigh i bhfeidhm leis an bhaol ó ailese cheirbheacsach a mhaolú.

BMA’s General Practitioners Committee Survey

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how does she plan to address the low morale of young general practitioners following the finding in a recent UK-wide survey, undertaken by the BMA’s General Practitioners Committee, that 40% of GPs in their twenties want to reduce their hours of work in the next 5 years. (AQW 1506/01)

Ms de Brún: I am aware of the findings of the survey undertaken by the BMA’s General Practitioners Committee and I am pleased to say that some of the issues identified are already being addressed. Following recommendations made by the Doctors’ and Dentists’ Review Body I recently announced above inflation

pay increases for doctors and a significant increase in GP registrar pay from April 2002. There are also plans to extend superannuation rights to non-principals.

A new General Medical Service contract is currently being negotiated which will further address issues identified in the report.

Tá torthaí an tsuirbhé déanta ag Coiste Ghnáthdhochtúirí an CMB ar eolas agam agus tá mé sásta a rá go bhfuiltear ag tabhairt faoi chuid de na ceisteanna aitheanta cheana féin. I ndiaidh moltaí déanta ag an Foras Athbheithnithe Dochtúirí agus na Fiaclóirí, d'fhógair mé ar na mallaibh go dtiocfadh meadú níos mó ná an ráta boilscithe ar phá dhochtúirí agus méadú mór ar phá Chláraitheoirí Gnáthdhochtúirí ó Aibreán 2002. Tá sé beartaithe fosta cearta pinsin a thabhairt do neamhstiúrthóirí.

Tá idirbheartaíocht á déanamh ar chonradh nua Seirbhíse Ginearálta Míochaine i láthair na huaire a thabharfaidh faoi cheisteanna aitheanta sa tuairisc a thuilleadh.

Support Mechanisms: Carers in the Community

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what support mechanisms are presently in place to support carers within the community. (AQW 1514/01)

Ms de Brún: A range of support mechanisms is provided in the community by Trusts and by voluntary organisations. Such services include meals on wheels, domiciliary care services, respite care and sitting services. Information, counselling and training is also provided particularly to new carers to allow them to adjust to their caring role.

At present legislation does not allow Trusts to offer services to carers to support them in their caring role. The Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill, which is currently being considered by the Assembly, is designed to allow Health and Social Services Trusts to offer services direct to carers.

Cuireann Iontaobhais agus eagraíochtaí deonacha réimse meicníochtaí tacaíochta ar fáil don phobal. Lena leithéid de na seirbhísí seo tá béilí ar rothaí, seirbhísí cúraim tí, cúram cairde agus seirbhísí feighlí. Tugtar eolas, comhairle agus oiliúint fosta, go háirithe d'fheighlithe nua chun ligean dóibh socrú síos ina bpostanna mar fheighlithe.

Ní ligean an reachtaíocht atá ann faoi láthair d'Iontaobhais seirbhísí a thairiscint d'fheighlithe chun tacú leo ina bpost feighlí. Tá Bille (Leasú) na Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta a bhfuil an Tionól ag déanamh machnaimh air leagtha amach chun ligean do na

hIontaobhais Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta seirbhísí a thairiscint go díreach d'fheighlithe.

GPs: Emergency Call-Outs

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the guidelines currently in use concerning emergency call-out GPs. (AQW 1516/01)

Ms de Brún: There are no specific guidelines for GPs when deciding if a call out is necessary. It remains a matter of clinical judgement and individual practice for the doctor to decide the best course of action in consultation with the patient or the patient's carer.

For example, in cases of suspected meningococcal infection, the Department's Chief Medical Officer has issued a letter to all GPs drawing attention to the importance of early diagnosis and intervention and the need to visit or re-visit should clinical deterioration be reported.

Níl treoirilinte ar leith ann do gnáthdhochtúirí agus iad ag déanamh cinnidh ar an ghá le cuairt a thabhairt nó gan chuairt a thabhairt. Is ceist mheasa chliniciúil agus chleachtaidh aonair don dochtúir í cinneadh a dhéanamh ar an riar is fearr, i gcomhairle leis an othar nó le feighlí an othair.

Mar shampla, i gcásanna daoine ar measadh go raibh infhabhtú meiningeacocúil orthu, chuir Príomh-Oifigeach Míochaine na Roinne litir chuig gach gnáthdhochtúirí ag cur béime ar thábhacht fháthmheasa agus choisc luaithe agus ar an ghá le cuairt a thabhairt ó a atabhairt dá gcuirfí meath cliniciúil in iúl.

Student Bursary: Qualified Nurse

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average cost, in terms of advertising, recruiting and training a new member of staff, for filling a vacant nursing post. (AQW 1518/01)

Ms de Brún: The average cost, including student bursary, for a newly qualified nurse is £30,000 over a 3-year period.

Is é £30,000 an meánchostas, sparánacht mhic léinn san áireamh, d'altra nuacháilithe thar tréimhse 3 bliain.

Mortality Rates: Surgeons

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to publish mortality rates for Northern Ireland surgeons. (AQW 1535/01)

Ms de Brún: I have no plans at present to publish such data.

Níl pleananna agam faoi láthair a leithéid de shonraí a fhoilsiú.

Adoption Services

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress is being made in improving adoption services.

(AQW 1549/01)

Ms de Brún: Between 1999/00 and 2000/01 the number of children adopted from care increased by 83% from 54 to 99.

The delivery of high quality adoption services is an important objective and the Social Services Inspectorate has completed an inspection of adoption services in each HSS Board. Boards are now working with Trusts to implement the Inspectorate's recommendations for improving all aspects of the service.

An overview report of the inspection is expected to be published in the Spring. Its conclusions and recommendations will inform a strategy for adoption as part of a wider Departmental programme for children's services.

Idir 1999/00 agus 2000/01 mhéadaigh líon na bpáistí faoi chúram uchtaíthe faoi 83% ó 54 go 99.

Is cuspóir tábhachtach é soláthar seirbhísí ardcháilíochta uchtaíthe agus chríochnaigh Foireann Chigireachta na Seirbhísí Sóisialta cigireacht ar sheirbhísí uchtaíthe i ngach Bord SSS. Tá Boird ag obair le hIontaobhais anois chun moltaí na Foirne Cigireachta d'fheabhsú i ngach gné de na seirbhísí a chur i bhfeidhm.

Táthar ag súil go bhfoilseofar achoimre ar thuairisc na cigireachta san Earrach. Molfaidh a conclúidí agus a moltaí gur chóir go mbeadh straitéis uchtaíthe mar chuid de chlár Rannach níos forleithne do sheirbhísí páistí.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Passenger Miles Travelled

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of passenger miles travelled by (a) bus; and (b) train, for which latest figures are available, and for each of the last three years.

(AQW 1350/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): Translink has advised that the numbers of passenger miles travelled by train over the 3 financial years 1998-1999, 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 were 134.9, 137.7 and 141.1 million respectively and that during

the first six months of 2001-2002 the total passenger miles travelled by train was 65.9 million.

Similar statistics are not available for bus passenger miles. However, Translink has advised that during 1998-1999, 1999-2000 and 2000-2001, its buses travelled 42.3, 42.5 and 41.3 million miles and accounted for 71.3, 69.5 and 67.1 million passenger journeys respectively. Total Translink bus miles travelled during the first six months of 2001-02 were 20.1 million accounting for 29.4 million passenger journeys. Information is not available in respect of other bus operators.

Road Gritting: Resources

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development how many (a) gritters (b) snow ploughs and (c) other types of machinery were available to treat winter conditions on trunk roads during December 2000 and December 2001.

(AQW 1390/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the vehicles and plant listed in the table below were available for winter maintenance activities during December 2000 and December 2001 (none of the items is used exclusively on trunk roads):

Equipment	December 2000	December 2001
(a) Gritters	136	137
(b) Snowploughs (lorry and tractor mountable)	217	217
(c) Other types of machinery (eg, loading shovels, diggers, tractor mounted loaders, snowblowers, tractor snowblower attachments etc)	58	66

Also, last year Roads Service entered into contracts with farmers and private contractors in all council areas to ensure that additional assistance would be available, if required, for snow clearing activities. As a result of these contracts, 237 additional pieces of equipment were available for use during December 2001.

Road Gritting

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there is a statutory requirement placed on local councils to grit roads and pedestrian routes.

(AQW 1403/01)

Mr P Robinson: There is no statutory requirement on either local councils or my Department's Roads Service to salt roads and footways during periods of snow or icy conditions. Roads Service does, however, earmark funds each year to provide a salting service on main through routes to help the safe and convenient movement of traffic in wintry conditions.

Traffic Signs

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to review the content, design and location of motorway and road signs to achieve greater safety and clarity for drivers.

(AQW 1419/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service will be reviewing the Traffic Signs Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997 based on the introduction, later this year, of revised GB Regulations by the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions. It is likely that the review will result in amendments to some existing signs and incorporate new signs to provide for improved safety and convenience of traffic.

Traffic Calming and Road Safety Initiatives

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the difference in objectives of traffic calming initiatives and road safety initiatives.

(AQW 1420/01)

Mr P Robinson: Road safety initiatives are aimed at reducing the number of people killed or injured on our roads. Such initiatives take the form of education, training and publicity as well as enforcement and road engineering measures.

Traffic calming initiatives are forms of road engineering measures which contribute to the overall aim of reducing road casualties. They include a variety of features such as mini roundabouts, traffic islands, pedestrian refuges, chicanes and road humps. In undertaking such measures, the objective of my Department's Roads Service is to improve driver behaviour and to control speed to a level in keeping with the surrounding urban environment, thereby reducing the number and severity of road traffic accidents.

Quality Bus Corridor

Mr Clyde asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what consideration he has given to the creation of a quality bus corridor on the A8(M) Larne line at Sandyknowes.

(AQW 1475/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department has no plans to provide a Quality Bus Corridor along the A8(M) route as it is a relatively short stretch of road, with only 5 buses per day in each direction and no bus stops or footways.

However, my Department's Roads Service has commissioned a major traffic consultant to investigate short to medium term improvements for traffic flows at the Sandyknowes end of the A8(M) and it is hoped

that some bus priority measures may ultimately prove possible at this location.

Equality Impact Assessment: Antrim/Knockmore Railway Line

Mr Clyde asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of responses received to the equality impact assessment of the proposed discontinuance of services on the Antrim to Knockmore railway line.

(AQW 1476/01)

Mr P Robinson: In total 24 responses were received to the consultation document; 14 from organisations, 3 from local government councils, one from an MLA and 6 from interested members of the public. Of these 24 responses, 12 raised specific points of concern relating to aspects of equality arising from the proposed discontinuance of services.

Equality Impact Assessment: Antrim/Knockmore Railway Line

Mr Clyde asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the percentage of male and female respondents to the equality impact assessment of the proposed discontinuance of services on the Antrim to Knockmore railway line.

(AQW 1480/01)

Mr P Robinson: In total 24 responses were received. Of these 17 were received from organisations, 2 of which were woman's organisations and 15 were from organisations that were not gender specific. Of the 7 individuals who responded 6 were male (86%) and one was female (14%).

Bangor Bus Station

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the number of buses based at Bangor Bus Station; and (b) the number of these which are over 5 years old.

(AQW 1562/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that 46 buses are based at the Bangor integrated bus and rail centre, 36 of which are over 5 years old.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

New Deal for Lone Parents

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the number of lone parents who (a) have accessed places on the New Deal scheme

for lone parents; and (b) are in receipt of the child care component. (AQW 1428/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): The figures on New Deal for Lone Parents are not available on a constituency basis. The total number who have agreed to participate in the programme in Northern Ireland from April 1998 to date is 8,809.

The total number of cases where childcare payments have been approved since 1 April 2000 is 347. The total expenditure on childcare allowance for this period is £186,330.

Solid Fuel Heating Systems

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Social Development if the Housing Executive has any plans to (a) replace solid fuel heating systems in parts of the Foyle constituency with oil, due to the dangers associated with right-vented chimney flues; and (b) inform home purchasers of the danger; and (c) provide compensation. (AQW 1429/01)

Mr Dodds: Rite-vent is a proprietary metal chimney flue which has a life span of up to 15 years. There is no question of a latent defect in the product. However, following an incident in Kinsale Park in the Waterside area of Londonderry, the Housing Executive decided to identify all dwellings with heating systems served by Rite-vent flues. This identified 217 dwellings, all of which are in Londonderry. These flues are generally 11 years old, however, taking into account their age and the heating replacement policy, the Housing Executive decided to convert the dwellings to oil, rather than replace the flues. The contract started recently and will be completed in 3 months. During the contract, sections of the removed flues will be examined in detail.

The Housing Executive's District Offices in the West Area are currently identifying the owner-occupiers in the affected estates. They will advise them of the course of action the Housing Executive is taking and suggest to them that they may wish to have their flues inspected by a reputable engineer at their own cost. The Housing Executive has no responsibility to compensate owner-occupiers.

Warmer Homes Grant Scheme

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications have been made for free central heating installation under the Warmer Homes Grant Scheme. (AQW 1448/01)

Mr Dodds: To date 1,532 applications have been made for free central heating installation under the Warm Homes grant scheme.

Warmer Homes Grant Scheme

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the average length of time which elapses between (a) the submission of an application for; and (b) the installation of free central heating under the Warmer Homes Grant Scheme. (AQW 1450/01)

Mr Dodds: The average length of time which elapses between (a) the submission of an application for; and (b) the installation of free central heating under the Warm Homes Grant Scheme is 3½ months.

NIAO Report (NIA 71/00)

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he has taken to introduce an agreement with NIE that reflects the full costs of the service provided by the Social Security Agency as recommended in the NIAO Report (NIA 71/00). (AQW 1460/01)

Mr Dodds: There are no plans at present to change the current arrangements which are in line with those operating in Great Britain. However this particular recommendation is being considered together with others contained in the report.

Common Selection Scheme

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Social Development what action he proposes to take to provide for wheelchair adapted bungalows in the Foyle constituency as a result of the suspension of the Housing Common Selection Scheme. (AQW 1461/01)

Mr Dodds: There has been no suspension of the Common Selection Scheme. However I understand that, pending the out come of a judicial review, a Housing Association has temporarily suspended allocations to one of its schemes in the Foyle area. This action does not affect the availability of wheelchair adapted bungalows in the Foyle constituency and does not require the provision of further accommodation than that already planned.

Chaine Walk: Demolition of Properties

Mr Clyde asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the timetable for the demolition of Housing Executive properties at Chaine Walk, Ballycraig, Antrim. (AQW 1478/01)

Mr Dodds: The Chaine Walk, properties cannot be demolished until the complex is vacated. The process of re-housing the existing occupants is on going but until this is completed, a timetable for the demolition cannot be drawn up.

Home Adaptations: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Executive households currently awaiting home adaptations in the borough of North Down. (AQW 1491/01)

Mr Dodds: The number of Housing Executive households currently awaiting home adaptations in the borough of North Down is 76.

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development how many pensioners will receive the winter fuel allowance. (AQW 1501/01)

Mr Dodds: So far in this financial year just over 256,000 Pensioners in Northern Ireland have received a Winter Fuel Payment.

Incapacity Benefit: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of unemployed people in West Tyrone who are claiming incapacity benefit. (AQW 1504/01)

Mr Dodds: Unemployed people cannot claim Incapacity Benefit. Incapacity Benefit is payable to people who are sick or disabled, have been incapable of work for 4 or more days in a row, and who are not entitled to Statutory Sick Pay. Jobseeker's Allowance is payable to unemployed customers who are available for and actively seeking work.

At August 2001 there were 6,587 Incapacity Benefit claimants and 2,859 Jobseeker's Allowance claimants in the West Tyrone constituency.

Jobseeker's Allowance: South Belfast

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by electoral ward, the total number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance in the South Belfast constituency. (AQW 1649/01)

Mr Dodds: The number of persons claiming Jobseeker's Allowance by electoral ward in the South Belfast constituency area is 1,701 and is detailed in the table below.

The figures provided are the most recent available at 13 December 2001.

Ward	Claimants
Ballynafeigh	154
Blackstaff	157

Ward	Claimants
Botanic	342
Finaghy	37
Malone	61
Musgrave	104
Ravenhill	69
Rosetta	59
Shaftesbury	229
Stranmillis	65
Upper Malone	59
Windsor	180
Woodstock	185
Total	1,701

Tackling Fraud

Mr R Hutchinson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) the effectiveness of measures currently being implemented to combat benefit fraud; and (b) the areas of Northern Ireland which have the highest levels of fraudulent claims. (AQO 672/01)

Mr Dodds: I am totally committed to a robust approach to tackling fraud and abuse of the social security system wherever it occurs.

The Social Security Agency pays out over £3 billion on benefits each year. Fraud and abuse is a serious problem but it is a problem that the Agency's management and staff are tackling with great determination. In 1999 the Agency published a comprehensive strategy which set out a systematic approach to tackling fraud and error across benefit systems.

This approach is starting to pay off. In the period from April 2001 to December 2001, fraud investigations were carried out on 9,900 cases. Of these investigations, 5,164 (52%) resulted in the withdrawal of claims or changes in the rate of benefit paid and 560 were referred for prosecution.

These are impressive figures. The level of activity shows that there is a determination to tackle fraud and the results confirm that the strategy and measures being implemented are effective.

In addition, the Agency has also introduced a programme of home visits and office interviews that seek to ensure that customers' benefit is always up to date. In the period from April 2001 to December 2001, Agency staff have carried out over 32,500 of these interventions of which 6,500 resulted in a change in the rate of benefit paid.

In relation to the second part of the question, fraud is recognised as being a problem across Northern Ireland as a whole. The Agency's strategy is based on

managing the risks associated with fraud rather than areas in which customers live. This is a good tactical and effective approach. Intelligence and information on fraud gathered by the Agency would not be statistically valid if it were to be broken down into small geographical areas.

Neighbourhood Renewal and Regeneration: Ballyhornan and Bishops court, Co Down

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions have taken place with his ministerial counterparts concerning an inter-departmental approach in respect of neighbourhood renewal and regeneration in Ballyhornan and Bishops court in Co Down.

(AQO 658/01)

Mr Dodds: I have had some discussion at Ministerial level about this issue. As this is a rural area where the main problems relate to roads and sewerage, these issues clearly fall outside my Department's area of responsibility. However, I am concerned about the serious difficulties faced by the residents of Ballyhornan and Bishops court and I have agreed to visit the area on a fact-finding exercise. I understand that the Ministers for the Environment and Regional Development visited Ballyhornan recently and I would intend to visit the area in the very near future.

In the meantime officials from the Housing Executive, for which my Department has responsibility, have

continued to work with the local residents group on housing issues. £90,000 in grants for housing improvements has already been provided and the Housing Executive mobile advice unit will visit the area in the near future to promote home improvement options. In addition the Housing Executive has been recently assisting a consultant who is facilitating the local group to seek funding for a family centre in Ballyhornan.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Speaker's Visits

Mr J Kelly asked the Assembly Commission to detail (a) the number of visits The Speaker has undertaken in his official capacity; (b) the destination of the visits; (c) the dates the visits took place; (d) the duration of the visits; and (e) who funded the visits.

(AQW 1496/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Fee): I am attaching a schedule listing the information which you requested in the above Assembly Question. As you will see, I have included the purpose of each of the Speaker's visits which I hope you will find helpful:

Destination	Date of visit	Duration	Purpose	Funder
Dublin	2 September 1998	1 day	Meetings with Ceann Comhairle and Cathaoirleach	NI Assembly
Brussels	3/5 November 1998	3 days	Leading an Assembly delegation on a familiarisation visit to the European Parliament and European Commission	Transition Programme
Boston	22/25 November 1998	3 days	Leading a delegation of Assembly Members on a familiarisation visit to Boston and Hartford, Connecticut	Boston College
London	10/12 February 1999	3 days	Led a visit by the Assembly Commission to Westminster for various meetings with House of Lords and House of Commons officials	NI Assembly
Dublin	24/25 February 1999	1 day	Meetings in the Oireachtas and speaking engagement at UCD	Belfast to Dublin travel paid for by the Assembly, remainder of costs paid by Lord Alderdice
Washington	15/19 March 1999	5 days	Attendance at Speaker's St Patrick's Day event and various other meetings and engagements in Washington	NI Assembly
Florence	16/18 May 1999	3 days	Annual meeting of the Conference of Presiding Officers of the Regional Legislative Assemblies of Europe	NI Assembly
Cardiff	26 May 1999	1 day	Official Opening of the Welsh Assembly	London/Cardiff return only paid by NI Assembly, remainder of costs paid by Lord Alderdice

Destination	Date of visit	Duration	Purpose	Funder
Dublin	31 May	evening	Engagement at Dublin Castle	NI Assembly
Oxford	12 November 1999	evening	Speaking engagement at Corpus Christi College Oxford	London/Oxford return only paid by NI Assembly, remainder of costs paid by Lord Alderdice
London	24/25 November 1999	overnight	Buckingham Palace reception	NI Assembly
Canberra	3/11 January 2000	9 days	Biennial Commonwealth Speakers' Conference	NI Assembly
Oxford	9 March 2000	overnight	Speaking Engagement – Oxford University	London/Oxford return only paid by NI Assembly, remainder of costs paid by Lord Alderdice
Boston/ Washington	15/18 March 2000	4 days	Speaking engagement at Boston College, attendance at Speaker's St Patrick's day event and various other meetings in Washington	NI Assembly
Dublin	23 May 2000	½ day	Meeting with the Ceann Comhairle	NI Assembly
Edinburgh	11/12 June 2000	2 days	Speaking engagement at Commonwealth Conference	NI Assembly
Isle of Man	5/6 July 2000	1½ days	Tynwald Ceremony	NI Assembly
Glasgow	18 October 2000	1 day	Donald Dewar's funeral	NI Assembly
Washington	7/14 March 2001	7 days	Led Business Committee delegation to Washington	Part travel costs paid by NI Assembly, remainder of travel and all accommodation and subsistence costs paid by Center for Democracy, Washington
Brussels/ London	16/18 May 2001	3 days	Meeting of the Steering Group of the Conference of Presiding Officers of Regional Legislative Assemblies of Europe. Meeting in London with College of Arms re Assembly Award to Fire Service.	NI Assembly
London	23 May 2001	part day	Meeting with Secretary of State	NI Assembly
Madeira	28/31 October 2001	3 days	Annual Conference of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Legislative Assemblies of Europe	NI Assembly
Botswana	7-13 January 2002	6 days	Biennial Commonwealth Speaker's Conference	NI Assembly

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 8 February 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND THE DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

District Council Community Relations Programme: Larne

Mr K Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what steps it is taking to address the changes that have taken place over the last two years in the economic, social and community climate of Larne. (AQW 833/01)

Reply: [*holding answer 15 January 2002*]: Our department through its Community Relations Unit provides funding under the District Council Community Relations Programme. Under this Programme Larne Borough Council has developed a Community Relations Plan which provides support and funding for community relations initiatives in the Borough. This plan is also directly linked to the Council's Corporate plan which states as a key strategic objective that "The Council will strive to effect positive and sustainable changes in community relations in the Borough".

Also, with the support of the Community Relations Unit, Larne District Partnership Board convened exploratory meetings with Larne Borough Council officials, the Community Relations Council and the Mediation Network to consider what might be done to improve community relations in the Borough. As a result proposals emerged for an initial consultative process to be taken forward by the Mediation Network.

From this process a Forum for Social Development has been created. The aim of the Forum is to improve understanding across the community in Larne by:

- The provision of facilitated space for conversation.
- Working through an agreed agenda.
- Understanding that this is a first phase to be built upon.
- Ensuring that membership reflects the entire community.

There have been three meetings convened to date with differing representation at each. The meetings are co-ordinated, chaired and facilitated by the Mediation Network for Northern Ireland. These initial meetings have taken place to discuss the kind of work that could be taken forward by the Forum, and to consider widening the membership of the Forum. It is intended that the forum will eventually be representative of the Business, Church, Youth, Community, Education and Voluntary sectors as well as elected members of Larne Borough Council, Larne Local Strategic Partnership and local MLAs. Consideration will also be given to having as balanced a group as possible in respect of gender, religion, age and rural/urban background.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Tuberculin Test

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to review procedures in relation to the isolation of inconclusive reactors in the TB testing scheme. (AQW 1529/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The isolation of inconclusive reactors to the tuberculin test is required under Council Directive 64/432 and therefore my Department has no scope to review this procedure.

TB and Brucellosis Testing

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if the £4.8 million spent on TB testing and the £3.44 million spent on brucellosis testing was sourced from her departmental budget or from European Union sources. (AQW 1530/01)

Ms Rodgers: The £4.8 million spent on TB and the £3.44 million spent on Brucellosis were sourced from my Departmental budget.

Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the earliest date, under European Union regulations, that the Less Favoured Areas Compensatory Allowance Payments could be paid to farmers in 2002. (AQW 1652/01)

Ms Rodgers: EU regulations do not set an earliest date for payments but they do require payments to be made according to the terms and conditions set out in the Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan as

approved by the Commission. One of the conditions is that payments can only be made to producers who maintain suckler-cow beef herds or sheep breeding flocks on their eligible land at a stocking density of at least 0.2 Live-stock Units per hectare. The necessary information is taken from claims for 2001 for Sheep Annual Premium and Suckler Cow Premium schemes. As the Suckler Cow Scheme does not close until December each year the practical consequences of this are that payments cannot realistically commence until late February/early March 2002.

Forestry Grant Schemes

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the figures relating to the uptake of the various Forestry Grant Schemes available to farmers, for the years 1997 to 2001. (AQW 1653/01)

Ms Rodgers: Forest Service statistics identify whether the land planted is agricultural or non-agricultural, rather than the occupation of the person carrying out the planting.

In the financial year 1997/1998, 419 hectares of agricultural land were planted.

In the financial year 1998/1999, 562 hectares of agricultural land were planted.

In the financial year 1999/2000, 601 hectares of agricultural land were planted.

In the financial year 2000/2001, 485 hectares of agricultural land were planted.

Environmentally Sensitive Areas

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when does she expect the Enhancement Plan element of the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme to re-open for applications. (AQW 1654/01)

Ms Rodgers: The capital enhancement (E-Plan) element of the Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) Scheme was closed to new applications with effect from 1 April 1999 because there were insufficient funds to meet demands. This was because of a significant and unanticipated upsurge in demand to exceed the budget available for capital works.

I recognise the demand for the re-opening of this discretionary element of the ESA Scheme. Indeed that interest is represented in one of the recommendations of the Vision Report. As you know the consultation period in respect of Vision has now closed and I wish to consider all recommendations and representations carefully, including those in respect of the reintroduction of capital enhancement measures.

I do hope to be in a position to announce my response to the Vision exercise in the next few months but until then I shall not be in a position to be more definitive about the reintroduction of this element of the ESA Scheme.

The Family of Settlements Report

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the document 'Shaping our Future: The Family of Settlements Report' in relation to spacial development issues and their expected impact on rural communities.

(AQW 1655/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Family of Settlements Report, which is a DRD publication, highlights the need to balance future development in the rural community whilst at the same time preserving and sustaining a high quality of life. The Report outlines a strategy that will enable all the regions of Northern Ireland to develop Area Plans and evaluate new housing developments against criteria, including an Urban and Rural Character Test, and will be evaluated and reviewed on a regular basis. I welcome this Report and the Regional Development Strategy which it underpins.

Committee on Standards in Public Life

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the standards expected for individuals appointed to quangos for which she is responsible. (AQW 1691/01)

Ms Rodgers: Following appointment, Board members should receive appropriate and timely information to assist them in carrying out their role, in line with recommendations made by the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

The information includes a copy of the Code of Best Practice for Board Members which takes account of the Guidance on Codes of Best Practice for Board Members of Public Bodies, incorporated in the White Paper 'The Governance of Public Bodies: A Progress Report' published in February 1997.

The 'Guidance on Codes of Best Practice for Board Members of Public Bodies' covers such issues as the Role of the Chair and Chief Executive; the corporate and individual responsibilities of Board Members in ensuring high standards of propriety and governance; handling conflicts of interest, including the keeping of public registers and the legal restrictions in taking part in decisions; board members' political activities; personal liability, and issues of openness and responsiveness.

Members of the Board of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission are required to comply with a

Code of Conduct which was approved by the North/South Ministerial Council at its meeting on 5 July 2000. The Code of Conduct is based on the Nolan Principles.

Farm Subsidy Payments in Euros

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what proposals she has to have direct support payments to Northern Ireland farmers paid in Euros; and to make a statement. (AQW 1800/01)

Ms Rodgers: There are no immediate plans to make farm subsidy payments in euros in respect of schemes administered by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. However, the Department will be considering in conjunction with the other UK agriculture departments the feasibility of providing farmers with the option of receiving grant and subsidy payments in euros at the earliest practical opportunity. Traders already have the option of receiving market support payments in euros.

'Future of Farming and Food' Report

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the 'Future of Farming and Food' Report, paragraph 74, which states that production subsidies should decline and be replaced by resources going to social and environmental objectives; and to make a statement. (AQW 1801/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food was created in fulfilment of a manifesto commitment by the Labour Party and its remit covered England only. In its final report published on 29 January 2002, the Commission did make a number of recommendations which, if acted upon, would have implications for the rest of the UK.

FACILITY PROVIDER

DC Area	District Council	Voluntary School (Secondary)	Voluntary Sports Club	Industrial/Commercial	Higher Education Body	ELB continue/Maintained Sec School	Total
Antrim	8	4	4	0	0	0	16
Ards	16	9	0	3	0	0	28
Armagh	11	9	0	0	0	0	20
Ballymena	4	15	0	0	0	0	19
Ballymoney	2	2	1	0	0	0	5
Banbridge	7	5	5	0	4	0	21
Belfast	38	49	49	0	12	6	154
Carrickfergus	9	4	3	0	0	0	16
Castlereagh	2	5	6	0	0	0	13
Coleraine	18	7	7	0	10	0	42
Cookstown	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
Craigavon	13	10	3	0	4	0	30

Should proposals for change emerge as a result of these recommendations, they would, of course, be discussed by the four UK Agriculture Ministers as appropriate and any subsequent action would be subject to collective decision. Naturally, I would seek to ensure that Northern Ireland's interests were fully reflected in such decisions.

On the specific subject of CAP reform and the reorientation of agricultural support, I must point out that, ultimately, this is a matter for agreement among the 15 EU Member States. I, of course, recognise that there are pressures for reform arising from a number of sources and we simply can not ignore these in the hope that they might go away. However, as I have stated publicly on a number of occasions, any reform of the CAP must be sensitive to the needs of the agricultural and rural communities. In particular, we should avoid adding to their existing fears and uncertainties about the future and must not risk creating feelings of isolation and exclusion. Any reform must take place only at a pace which the industry can sustain and there need to be mechanisms put in place to help the industry through this change process.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Public Tennis Courts

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, by constituency, the number of public tennis courts. (AQW 1509/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The information you requested is not available. However, I attach a summary of tennis facility provision in Northern Ireland at district council level.

FACILITY PROVIDER

DC Area	District Council	Voluntary School (Secondary)	Voluntary Sports Club	Industrial/ Commercial	Higher Education Body	ELB continue/ Maintained Sec School	Total
Derry	14	9	1	0	0	0	24
Down	4	10	4	0	0	0	18
Dungannon	2	12	2	0	4	0	20
Fermanagh	2	10	7	0	0	0	19
Larne	0	3	4	0	0	0	7
Limavady	8	4	3	0	0	0	15
Lisburn	10	8	9	0	0	0	27
Magherafelt	4	9	0	0	0	0	13
Moyle	12	0	0	0	0	0	12
Newry & Mourne	7	9	7	0	0	0	23
Newtownabbey	15	10	1	0	4	0	30
North Down	6	7	11	0	0	0	24
Omagh	3	4	1	0	0	0	8
Strabane	1	3	0	0	0	0	4
Total	218	217	128	3	38	6	610

Irish Language Projects

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money has been allocated to fund Irish Language projects in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 1564/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Funding for the promotion of Irish language is allocated to the North/South Language Body. Projects with an Irish language dimension may, subject to meeting the programme criteria, avail of funding from departmental programmes with a range of objectives.

The amounts below include money allocated to the North/South Language Body, mainstream programme funding, European programme funding and funding for education through the medium of Irish. It is not always possible to identify the Irish language funding element, if any, in a grant for much wider objectives.

1998/1999	Departmental Expenditure	£ 6,720,730.00
1999/2000	Departmental Expenditure	£10,167,307.04
2000/2001	Departmental Expenditure	£ 7,216,072.17
2000/2001	North/South Language Body Funding	£ 1,803,000.00

Targeting Social Need

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what proportion of his budget is directed at Targeting Social Need; and to make a statement.

(AQW 1570/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Firstly I would refer you to a report commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister entitled "Public

Expenditure and New Targeting Social Need" which was published in November 2001. This report is based on research work carried out by Economic, Planning and Environmental Consultants Limited and covered all Government Departments. This can be accessed on the internet at www.research.ofmdfmi.gov.uk. The main references to this Department are contained in pages 13 and 14 and I have attached copies of these for ease of reference.

Many of the Department's business areas contribute to TSN objectives, particularly in relation to providing access to facilities and services by disadvantaged groups, increasing job opportunities in disadvantaged areas and promoting social inclusion.

The Public Library Service contributes to the new TSN objectives through ensuring access for disadvantaged people to education and learning facilities with a view to improving employability and increasing social and economic participation. The Department estimates that about 5% (£970,000) of the available public library resources have been "skewed" to the Education and Library Boards on the basis of social deprivation. Each Board area has opened a centre of excellence providing adaptive technology for the disabled and visually impaired people to enable access to the internet and world wide web.

Investment in the Performing and Creative Arts also contributes to new TSN objectives, although the precise allocation of resources is difficult to quantify. The Arts Council has estimated that it spent in the region of £900,000 (13% of grant in aid) in 2000/2001 on TSN objectives and this figure is expected to rise to £1.3 million (or 16% of grant in aid) in 2001/2002. In addition to this some 32% of spend on the Awards for All Scheme administered by the Community Fund in

the period April 2001 – December 2001 was directed at the most disadvantaged local authority areas.

Of the £450,000 budget for the Creativity Seed Fund in 2001/2002, around £70,000 is being directed to pilot projects that are designed to impact on marginalised young people – Northern Visions £30k, Synergy E-media £25k and Childrens' Express £15k.

Of the £412,000 grant in aid to the Northern Ireland Film Commission for 2001/2002, £110,000 is being directed to organisations (The Nerve Centre £80k and Northern Visions, £30k) with a track record in working with people from disadvantaged groups/areas.

The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, as part of its outreach and learning strategy, is opening up contact with schools in areas of social disadvantage. It is envisaged that the exploratory work and the provision of services to these schools, whether in-house in PRONI or in the school environment or online, will take up 20% of the time of a member of curatorial staff, ie around £5,000.

The Department has recently been allocated £5 million under the Water Based Tourism measure of Peace II for an Angling Development Programme and a Water Recreation Programme. The Department is committed to allocating at least 60% of the funding from these programmes to areas of social need.

In addition to the above, many projects funded from Lottery funds and through the Events Company contribute to TSN objectives. The Department has also spent in the region of £15,000 on research work to establish baseline data for TSN monitoring purposes.

The Department is engaged in a range of research including demand for Irish and Ulster-Scots childcare and pre-school education and minority ethnic language issues. A training pilot project for Irish language TV and film production will start on 11 February 2002. An interdepartmental working group chaired by DCAL has agreed to undertake a "Future Search" process which will involve full consultation with colleagues and representatives of minority ethnic groups. The estimated expenditure on these activities is £250k in this financial year. It is not possible to identify separately the TSN element.

There are other aspects of the Department's work which support TSN objectives which are difficult to quantify in budgetary terms. OSNI products and services support a broad range of activities that are crucial to the economic and social development in both rural and urban areas of Northern Ireland. OSNI's topographic and geographic data for example, underpin town and country planning, health services planning, maintenance of public utilities, pollution control and emergency services.

Overall, I believe this level of activity over a wide range of the Department's functions reflects a serious commitment by the Department to targeting social need.

Arts Council Lottery Fund Allocations

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the Arts Council Lottery Fund allocations, by constituency, over the past 3 years. (AQW 1571/01)

Mr McGimpsey: During the past 3 financial years grants awarded by the Arts Council Lottery Fund broken down by Constituency are as follows:

	1999/00		2000/01		2001/2002	
	No of Awards	Value £	No of Awards	Value £	No of Awards	Value £
East Antrim	3	51,197	0	0	2	290,031
North Antrim	2	30,860	0	0	3	1,430,516
South Antrim	1	5,735	1	14,062	0	0
East Belfast	9	240,902	0	0	6	233,790
North Belfast	3	161,860	3	110,584	7	100,245
South Belfast	20	494,336	14	396,475	26	2,148,457
West Belfast	4	119,753	6	223,684	7	396,838
North Down	1	8,328	1	9,981	1	67,308
South Down	1	2,962	1	15,300	3	124,970
Fermanagh/ South Tyrone	2	58,248	0	0	2	49,305
Foyle	10	227,392	1	5,625	6	762,134
Lagan Valley	0	0	0	0	3	107,290
Londonderry East	2	35,064	1	630	0	0
Newry & Armagh	2	58,470	1	15,266	0	0
Strangford	2	44,661	0	0	1	13,500
West Tyrone	1	42,450	0	0	3	118,910
Ulster Mid	3	59,169	0	0	0	0
Upper Bann	1	3,964	0	0	1	25,000

It should be noted that information relative to Constituencies is derived from the applicant's postcodes. To attribute the grants to the postcodes of the Constituencies therefore could present a misleading picture of the actual beneficiaries of lottery awards.

Details of all Lottery Awards made by all National Lottery Distributing Bodies across the UK can be accessed through the Awards Search on the Web Site of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport: www.culture.gov.uk/lottery/index.html

Ulster Orchestra: Grants

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) the financial awards/grants made to the Ulster Orchestra over the past 6 years; and (b) the percentage of the awards/grants devoted to the Ulster Orchestra Schools/Youth Programme.

(AQW 1573/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I must state at the outset that Government funding for the arts in Northern Ireland, including the Ulster Orchestra, is disbursed through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Financial grants and awards were paid to the Ulster Orchestra since 1996 as follows:

REVENUE GRANTS

1996/97	£1,148,000
1997/98	£1,148,000
1998/99	£1,348,000
1999/00	£1,298,000
2000/01	£1,298,000
2001/02	£1,250,000

LOTTERY GRANTS

1996/02	£1,151,428*
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*The Lottery grants awarded during the 6 year period covered specific schemes including education projects, the commissioning of new work, touring in Northern Ireland and audience development. Total funds, including Lottery grants, allocated to the Orchestra by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland from 1996 to 2002 is £8,641,428.

The proportion of the Orchestra's funding of £8,641,428 spent on the Schools/Youth Programme is £1,003,884, which represents 11.6% of total funding. The Ulster Orchestra also fundraises specifically for its education budget from trusts, foundations, sponsors, district councils (Stakeholding Scheme) and education and library boards. The money raised and spent on this additional education work is not represented by the figures above.

W&G Baird: Printing Costs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, for his Department and associated agencies, (a) the total amount of money paid to W & G Baird for printing over the last 5 years; (b) if the work was tendered and awarded to the lowest tender; and (c) if there was any variation from the price quoted to the actual cost paid.

(AQW 1616/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I can confirm that since devolution two printing contracts have been awarded under tender

to W & G Baird by the two Agencies of DCAL. The details are as follows:

Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland £1,740. The lowest tender was accepted and there was no variation between quoted and actual costs paid.

Public Record Office of Northern Ireland £6,215. The lowest tender was not selected and the actual costs paid were less than the original quotation.

Chief Executive for the Ulster-Scots Agency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the recruitment criteria used for the selection of a Chief Executive for the Ulster-Scots Agency.

(AQW 1620/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The North South Ministerial Council meeting in Language Sectoral format on 7 December 2001 approved the process for selection of a Chief Executive by open competition.

Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch has contracted PricewaterhouseCoopers Belfast (consultants) to manage the recruitment competition.

It is for Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch to agree a job description and person specification for the Chief Executive post in accordance with best practice, which includes establishing the competences required to meet business need.

Chief Executive for Tha Boord o Ulster Scotch

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) if the newly appointed Chief Executive for the Boord o Ulster-Scotch speaks Ulster Scotch; and (b) the Chief Executive's relevant experience for this post including his cultural background.

(AQW 1621/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The new Chief Executive for Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch has not been appointed yet. The appointment will be a matter for Tha Boord o Ulster Scotch, subject to the approval of the North/South Ministerial Council, and will be made in accordance with best practice, which includes establishing the competences required to meet business need.

Standards in Public Life

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the standards expected of individuals appointed to quangos for which he is responsible.

(AQW 1638/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I am committed to ensuring that appointments to Public Bodies for which I have ultimate

responsibility are made in accordance with the principles which came directly from recommendations by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (previously Nolan Committee now Neill Committee).

To this end, following appointment, all NDPB Board members receive relevant and timely information to assist them in carrying out their role, in line with the recommendations. The information includes a copy of the Code of Best Practice for Board Members which each NDPB has. This takes account of the Guidance on Codes of Best Practice for Board Members of Public Bodies, incorporated in the White Paper 'The Governance of Public Bodies: A Progress Report' published in February 1997 and subsequently updated by the Treasury in 2000 to take further account of the publication of the Government's commitments in 'Quangos: Opening the Doors' published in June 1998 following the consultation exercise * that included Northern Ireland.

The 'Guidance on Codes of Best Practice for Board Members of Public Bodies' provides a framework which covers such issues as the Role of the Chair and Chief Executive; the corporate and individual responsibilities of Board Members in ensuring high standards of propriety and governance; handling conflicts of interest, including the keeping of public registers and the legal restrictions in taking part in decisions; board members' political activities; personal liability, and issues of openness and responsiveness.

To promote public confidence my Department will continue to disseminate any revision of these guidelines to all NDPBs to ensure the highest standards of openness and transparency expected of all individuals appointed to NDPBs within my remit.

*'Opening Up Quangos' November 1997

Irish Football Association

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the names of Irish League Clubs who employ personnel who have a dual role with the Irish Football Association. (AQW 1676/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is a matter for the Irish Football Association as the Governing Body for soccer. You may therefore wish to make a direct approach to the Irish Football Association for this information.

Irish Football Association

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of coaches employed by the Irish Football Association who have dual employment with an Irish League Club. (AQW 1677/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is a matter for the Irish Football Association as the Governing Body for soccer. You may therefore wish to make a direct approach to the Irish Football Association for this information.

Irish Football Association

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the numbers of persons currently employed by the Irish Football Association.

(AQW 1678/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is a matter for the Irish Football Association as the Governing Body for soccer. You may therefore wish to make a direct approach to the Irish Football Association for this information.

Irish Football Association

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of members of staff of the Irish Football Association that attended the 2004 European Championships draw in Portugal on Friday 25 January 2002.

(AQW 1699/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is a matter for the Irish Football Association as the Governing Body for soccer. You may therefore wish to make a direct approach to the Irish Football Association for this information. [R]

Irish Football Association

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any negotiations which have been undertaken between Sky Television and the Irish Football Association.

(AQW 1716/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is a matter for the Irish Football Association as the Governing Body for soccer. You may therefore wish to make a direct approach to the Irish Football Association for this information.

Irish Football Association

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the current leasing arrangements between the Irish Football Association and Linfield Football Club.

(AQW 1717/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is a matter for the Irish Football Association as the Governing Body for soccer. You may therefore wish to make a direct approach to the Irish Football Association for this information. [R]

Public Golf Courses

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of public golf courses per constituency. (AQW 1782/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The information you requested is unavailable. However, I attach an analysis of golfing provision at district council level, broken down by 18 hole golf courses, 9 hole golf courses and driving ranges.

New Opportunities Funding

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how the New Opportunities Funding for sport in schools will be distributed. (AQO 817/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The New Opportunities Fund launched its £33.75m PE and Sport in Schools Programme in Northern Ireland on 23 January 2002 (this is a gross total and includes the NOF's costs in administering the scheme). The aim of the programme is to

NORTHERN IRELAND 18 HOLE GOLF COURSES - FACILITY PROVIDER

DC Area	District Council	Voluntary School (Secondary)	Voluntary Sports Club	Industrial/ Commercial	Higher Education Body	ELB continue/ Maintained Sec School	Total
Antrim	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Ards	0	0	3	0	0	0	3
Armagh	0	0	2	2	0	0	4
Ballymena	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Ballymoney	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Banbridge	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast	0	0	4	0	0	0	4
Carrickfergus	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
Castlereagh	0	0	3	0	0	0	3
Coleraine	0	0	4	0	0	0	4
Cookstown	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Craigavon	0	0	3	0	0	0	3
Derry	0	0	1	1	0	0	2
Down	0	0	5	0	0	0	5
Dungannon	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Fermanagh	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Larne	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Limavady	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lisburn	0	0	3	0	0	0	3
Magherafelt	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Moyle	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Newry & Mourne	0	0	4	0	0	0	4
Newtownabbey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
North Down	0	0	6	0	0	0	6
Omagh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Strabane	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
Total	0	0	50	3	0	0	53

NORTHERN IRELAND 9 HOLE GOLF COURSES - FACILITY PROVIDER

DC Area	District Council	Voluntary School (Secondary)	Voluntary Sports Club	Industrial/ Commercial	Higher Education Body	ELB continue/ Maintained Sec School	Total
Antrim	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Ards	0	0	1	1	0	0	2
Armagh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ballymena	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ballymoney	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Banbridge	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Belfast	0	0	3	0	0	0	3

DC Area	District Council	Voluntary School (Secondary)	Voluntary Sports Club	Industrial/ Commercial	Higher Education Body	ELB continue/ Maintained Sec School	Total
Carrickfergus	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
Castlereagh	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Coleraine	1	0	6	0	0	0	7
Cookstown	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Craigavon	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Derry	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Down	0	0	3	0	0	0	3
Dungannon	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fermanagh	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Larne	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Limavady	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Lisburn	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
Magherafelt	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Moyle	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Newry & Mourne	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
Newtownabbey	2	0	2	0	0	0	4
North Down	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Omagh	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
Strabane	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	7	0	28	2	0	0	37

NORTHERN IRELAND DRIVING RANGES - FACILITY PROVIDER

DC Area	District Council	Voluntary School (Secondary)	Voluntary Sports Club	Industrial/ Commercial	Higher Education Body	ELB continue/ Maintained Sec School	Other (eg private)	Total
Antrim	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Ards	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Armagh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ballymena	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ballymoney	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Banbridge	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Carrickfergus	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Castlereagh	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
Coleraine	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cookstown	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Craigavon	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Derry	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Down	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dungannon	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Fermanagh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Larne	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Limavady	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Lisburn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Magherafelt	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Moyle	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newry & Mourne	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newtownabbey	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	2
North Down	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Omagh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Strabane	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	5	0	2	5	0	0	1	13

bring about a step change in the attitude and involvement of young people and communities in physical activity and sport. This step change in provision is intended not just to offer sporting opportunities, but also to have a long-term impact on key issues facing local communities such as education, health, crime and drugs use.

Education and Library Boards will act as the Lead Organisations for the grant programme. The New Opportunities Fund has allocated funding to each Education and Library Board area as follows:

Belfast Education and Library Board	£8.7m
Western Education and Library Board	£7.5m
Southern Education and Library Board	£6.0m
South Eastern Education and Library Board	£4.8m
North Eastern Education and Library Board	£4.7m

These allocations are based on the size of the school population and the levels of deprivation within the Education and Library Board area.

EDUCATION

Burns Report

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how much of his budget has been allocated to the consultation process on the Burns Report. (AQW 1534/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): It is important that the public are aware of the Burns proposals and have an opportunity to comment on them or offer alternative proposals.

Consultation costs, including publication and distribution of the Review Body's Report, the production of a video, and the issue of a pamphlet to every household, are expected to total some £600,000 over 2001/02 and 2002/03. I also intend to publish a summary of the consultation outcomes – costs have not yet been estimated.

Burns Report

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education whether or not the Burns Report represents his policy on the future of secondary education. (AQW 1536/01)

Mr M McGuinness: No decisions will be taken until I have considered responses to the consultation. The Burns Report constitutes an important and detailed set of proposals on possible future arrangements. I have made it clear that I want views on new post-primary arrangements which may be the Burns proposals; some modification of the Burns proposals; or alternative arrangements.

Physical Education

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to ensure that sport is given a higher priority in the school curriculum. (AQW 1550/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Physical Education is compulsory within the Northern Ireland curriculum for all pupils from age 4 to 16 and this shows the degree of importance which is attached to the subject. All children are encouraged to participate in a wide range of PE and sports activities in schools and in the wider community. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) is currently carrying out a review of the curriculum and PE is being considered as part of this review.

Autism

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education who will be developing videos for parents of children with autism and dyslexia and CD-ROMs for their teachers, as agreed at the NSMC Education sectoral meeting on 28 November 2001. (AQW 1554/01)

Mr M McGuinness: A DE-led, cross-border steering group, comprising officials from the Departments of Education, North and South, and representatives of the voluntary organisations, Parents And Professionals Autism, (PAPA) and the Irish Society for Autism, (ISA), has been established. This group is taking forward both the video and CD-ROM projects.

A PAPA-led project team will involve parents and professionals, North and South, in the development of a video in conjunction with Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

The video for parents will provide a level of support of newly diagnosed children and teachers, who may find children with autism in their mainstream classroom.

A CD-ROM for professionals will be produced in 2002/03. This will be subject to a competitive tendering process and will be managed by PAPA.

Timescales indicate that the video and CD-ROM will be available for distribution in September.

A similar project in relation to Dyslexia will be led by the Department for Education and Science and will include representatives from North and South.

Inter-Board Numeracy Strategy Steering Group

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the materials produced to help children improve their mathematics skills as discussed at the NSMC Education sectoral meeting on 28 November 2001; (b)

who produced the materials; and (c) who was consulted in producing the materials. (AQW 1555/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The materials for schools were produced on foot of an action research project, carried out on behalf of the Inter Board Numeracy Strategy Steering Group. The aim was the development of strategies for success in numeracy in the early years of statutory education and the materials were developed in co-operation with teachers in the 10 participating primary schools.

Female Primary School Teachers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education how many female primary school teachers are employed in each Education Board area. (AQW 1582/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of permanent full-time and part-time female primary school teachers employed in each Education and Library Board area is as follows:

Belfast Education & Library Board	1102
Western Education & Library Board	1247
North Eastern Education & Library Board	500
South Eastern Education & Library Board	1442
Southern Education & Library Board	1670

Male Primary School Teachers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education how many male primary school teachers are employed in each Education Board area. (AQW 1585/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of permanent full-time and part-time male primary school teachers employed in each Education and Library Board area is as follows:

Belfast Education & Library Board	256
Western Education & Library Board	291
North Eastern Education & Library Board	275
South Eastern Education & Library Board	304
Southern Education & Library Board	335

Burns Report

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail the estimated cost of (a) printing; and (b) distributing an exploratory leaflet on the Burns Report to every household, as indicated in his press release of 17 January 2002. (AQW 1607/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The explanatory leaflet will include a freepost response form and is designed to

ensure that everyone is aware of the Burns proposals and has an opportunity to comment on them or suggest modifications or alternative proposals for post-primary education.

The estimated costs of printing and distribution to every household are

Printing	£100,000
Distribution	£170,000

Board of Governors

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) why is there a difference in the number of members appointed to the Board of Governors of a Controlled Primary School compared with Controlled Integrated Primary Schools; and (b) in the event that there is a choice in the numbers appointed, who is responsible for choosing that particular number. (AQW 1619/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

- (a) The process to allow certain categories of existing schools to transform to Controlled Integrated Status was introduced in the Education (NI) Order 1984. The legislation specified that the Board of Governors for Controlled Integrated schools should have either 14 or 21 members. Boards of Governors for Controlled Primary Schools may have 9, 16 or 24 members. The increase in the minimum number of Governors on the Board of a Controlled Integrated School was to provide for representatives of the Trustees of Catholic Maintained Schools in the area and to provide for balance between the two main traditions in nominations of the other representative bodies. The following table compares representation on the Board of Governors in Controlled and Controlled Integrated Schools.

Representative Body	Minimum Size of Board of Governors	
	Controlled	Controlled Integrated
ELB	2	4
Transferors	4	2
Trustees	-	2
Parents	2	4
Teachers	1	2
Total Number	9	14

- (b) The size of the Board of Governors of controlled schools is determined by the Education and Library Board.

Psychologists

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education how many educational psychologists are employed in each Education Board area. (AQW 1650/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of educational psychologists currently employed in each Education and Library Board area is as follows: -

Board	Full-Time	Part-Time
Belfast	16	13
Western	22	4
North Eastern	20	4
South Eastern	18	9
Southern	22	8

Pre-School Education

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the latest enrolment statistics for funded pre-school education in the constituency of North Belfast, and of those, (b) the number of children in receipt of free school meals whose parents receive Income Support or Income-Based Jobseeker's Allowance. (AQW 1679/01)

Mr M McGuinness: (a) The 2000/01 enrolments are as follows:

Nursery schools/classes	
Full-time	858
Part-time	156
Reception	46
Pre-School education in other centres	121
Total	1181

Overall enrolments for 2001/02 are not yet available.

Of the children at (a) above, the number entitled to free school meals and the number whose parents receive Income Support or Income-Based Jobseeker's Allowance are as follows:

	Number of Children Entitled to Free School Meals	Number of Children with Parent(s) in Receipt of Income Support or Income-Based Jobseeker's Allowance ¹
Nursery Schools/Classes		
Full-time	371	359
Part-time	6	33
Reception	18	Not available

Pre-school education in other centres	Not applicable	48
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¹ At the time of first application for admission.

Down High School: Accommodation

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education what action is he taking to improve accommodation at Down High School. (AQW 1680/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I refer the Member to my response to her previous AQW 1495/01.

Down High School: Accommodation

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education what steps will he take to replace the temporary accommodation at Down High School. (AQW 1683/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I refer the Member to my response to her previous AQW 1495/01.

2001/02 Enrolments: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of pupils enrolled at each primary school in the North Down constituency; and (b) the number of Primary One pupils in these schools for the academic year beginning September 2001. (AQW 1690/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

(a) The 2001/02 enrolments are as follows:

School Name	Nursery Classes	Reception Classes/Groups	P1-P7	Total Enrolment
Ballyholme Primary School	0	0	638	638
Ballymagee Primary School	0	0	404	404
Ballyvester Primary School	0	0	80	80
Bangor Central Primary School	0	0	491	491
Bangor Grammar School Prep Dept	0	0	119	119
Bloomfield Road Primary School	50	0	310	360
Clandeboyne Primary School	0	0	344	344
Conlig Primary School	0	2	52	54
Crawfordsburn Primary School	0	8	164	172

School Name	Nursery Classes	Reception Classes/ Groups	P1-P7	Total Enrolment
Donaghadee Primary School	52	0	427	479
Glencraig Primary School	0	0	175	175
Glenlola Collegiate Prep Dept	0	6	72	78
Grange Park Primary School	0	0	356	356
Groomspoint Primary School	0	0	24	24
Holywood Primary School	0	0	445	445
Kilcooley Primary School	26	0	131	157
Kilmaine Primary School	53	0	678	731
Millisle Primary School	0	8	142	150
Rathmore Primary School	0	0	429	429
Redburn Primary School	0	0	168	168
St Anne's Primary School	0	1	46	47
St Comgall's Primary School	0	15	276	291
St Malachy's Primary School	48	0	354	402
St Patrick's Primary School	0	4	229	233
Sullivan Upper School Prep Dept	0	0	181	181
Towerview Primary School	52	0	339	391

(b) The Year 1 enrolments are as follows:

School Name	Year 1
Ballyholme Primary School	76
Ballymagee Primary School	58
Ballyvester Primary School	16
Bangor Central Primary School	78
Bangor Grammar School Prep Dept	21
Bloomfield Road Primary School	39
Clandeboyne Primary School	35
Conlig Primary School	9
Crawfordsburn Primary School	28
Donaghadee Primary School	59
Glencraig Primary School	25
Glenlola Collegiate Prep Dept	6
Grange Park Primary School	51
Groomspoint Primary School	2
Holywood Primary School	64
Kilcooley Primary School	21
Kilmaine Primary School	87
Millisle Primary School	20
Rathmore Primary School	61
Redburn Primary School	19
St Anne's Primary School	7
St Comgall's Primary School	41
St Malachy's Primary School	43
St Patrick's Primary School	38
Sullivan Upper School Prep Dept	23
Towerview Primary School	45

Exam Results: Appeals

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail, for each year since 1995, (a) the number of GCSE and A Level exam results which have been appealed; and (b) the number of appeals upheld.

(AQW 1700/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

CCEA	GCE A Level		GCSE	
	Number of Appeals Received	Number of Appeals Allowed	Number of Appeals Received	Number of Appeals Allowed
2001 ¹	3	1	1	1
2000	7	0	4	0
1999	3	2	1	1
1998	1	0	0	0
1997	2	0	0	0

¹ Provisional figures - to be reported formally by QCA later in 2002.

Equivalent information for 1995 and 1996 is not available.

Educational Needs: "At Risk" Children

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education what additional funding is he providing this year to meet the educational needs of looked-after children.

(AQW 1708/01)

Mr M McGuinness: No additional funds specifically ear marked to meet the educational needs of looked-after children have been provided this year. Additional funding has been made available for programmes to support young people 'at risk' in the education sector and participants may include looked after children. My Department, together with DHSS&PS, is funding research into the educational experiences of looked-after children. Additional resources have been made available from the Executive Programme Children's Fund to provide educational support to children in residential settings and these are being managed by DHSS&PS.

Suspensions and Expulsions: Looked-After Children

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail the numbers of looked-after children, in 2000-01, who were (a) excluded; (b) expelled from school; and (c) to express the figures as a ratio of all schoolchildren.

(AQW 1709/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The information sought is not available. Schools are not asked to identify looked-after children in their notifications to the Education and Library Boards about suspensions or proposed expulsions and there are no plans to do this.

Research Briefing

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of each research briefing undertaken, on behalf of his Department, since 1998 and to indicate, in each case, the research body involved.

(AQW 1711/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Details of the research projects for which a Research Briefing has been published by my Department since 1998 are as follows:

Research	Research Body	Cost (£)
Science at Key Stage 4	Queen's University, Belfast	92,891
Practice in mainstream schools for children with special educational needs	University of Newcastle upon Tyne	29,745
An evaluation of the Craigavon two-tier system	Queen's University, Belfast	25,000

Research	Research Body	Cost (£)
Northern Ireland suspension and expulsion study 1996/1997	Queen's University, Belfast	32,772
Supporting newly qualified teachers in post-primary schools	University of Ulster	20,000
Literature review: integrated education in Northern Ireland	University of Ulster	6,500
Women in teaching: equal opportunities	Deloitte and Touche	67,556
Three years later: a follow-up survey of teachers who qualified in 1995	Queen's University, Belfast	9,992
Immersion education: a literature review	Queen's University, Belfast; St Mary's University College	5,000
From pre-school to school: a review of the research literature	Queen's University, Belfast	5,000
The effects of the selective system of secondary education in Northern Ireland	Queen's University, Belfast; University of Ulster; Stranmillis University College; St Mary's University College; BDO Stoy Hayward	110,000
Assessment of the effectiveness of the Youth Service Community Relations Support Scheme (YSCRSS) during 1998/1999 and 1999/2000, in relation to the needs of youth and community groups	Capita	14,625
An investigation of the provision for health education in schools during 1998/99	University of Ulster	35,664
Careers provision in schools at Key Stages 3 and 4	BDO Stoy Hayward	24,040

Counselling

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to give his assessment of the pilot Schools Counselling and Support Service; and to make a statement on the possible extension of this service to all schools.

(AQW 1712/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I welcome the initiative taken by the NSPCC in collaboration with the SEELB and WELB to establish pilot counselling for pupils projects in those areas and I look forward to reading the evaluation report in due course. Counselling support will be extended on a limited basis to all Board areas during 2002-03 with resources provided from the Executive Programme Children's Fund.

Dundonald Primary School

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) his plans for the redevelopment of Dundonald Primary School; and (b) the timescale for the commencement of any such work; and to make a statement.

(AQW 1729/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Economic Appraisal prepared by the SEELB which examines various options for meeting the accommodation needs of Dundonald Primary School is currently being revised in liaison with my Department. Completion of this document will ensure that the scheme can be considered along with others for inclusion in the next school capital programme. However, given the number of schemes competing for a place in the programme and the limited available financial resources I am unable to give any guarantee as to whether Dundonald Primary School will be included in the next capital funding announcement.

Policy on Bullying Behaviour

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what is the agreed policy within Boards and schools relating to first-time bullying and continual bullying incidents.

(AQW 1732/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Responsibility for policy to deal with bullying behaviour rests with schools. Every school is required to have a written discipline policy which must promote self-discipline among pupils, good behaviour and respect for others. Bullying behaviour, as unacceptable behaviour, should be addressed by schools at the very least as part of their existing policies. Many schools on a voluntary basis have developed a separate anti-bullying policy.

I intend to strengthen this position by taking the next legislative opportunity to make it a mandatory requirement upon every school to have an anti-bullying policy in place and to implement it.

Bullying Incidents

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education how many incidents of bullying have taken place in each Board Area in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1733/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The information is not available. As I indicated in the Written Answers Booklet for Tuesday 6 February 2001 and Friday 6 April 2001, data on incidents of alleged bullying is not collected by my Department, nor by the Education and Library Boards.

Recording Bullying Incidents

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to outline the system used to record and deal with bullying incidents in schools. (AQW 1734/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is a matter for each school to decide how it will deal with bullying incidents and what system of recording will be used. Advice and guidance for schools on tackling bullying is issued regularly by my Department, the Education and Library Boards and voluntary organisations.

Temporary Classrooms: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of mobile or temporary classrooms in use in schools in the North Down constituency.

(AQW 1748/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The most recent figures available are for last September and, at that date, 138 temporary classrooms were in use in schools in the constituency.

Temporary Classrooms

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the total number of mobile or temporary classrooms in use in schools in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 1749/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Last year there were an estimated 3,000 temporary classrooms in use in schools. The numbers for previous years are not available.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Take-Up Rate: Student Loans

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the take-up rates of student loans by students in individual further and higher education colleges over the last three years.

(AQW 1324/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): I attach tables illustrating the take-up rate of student loans by students at the relevant further and higher education colleges during the last three complete academic years. A further table illustrates the increase in take-up rates, by institution, over the same period.

TABLE 1 YEAR 1998-1999

Further Education Institution	No. of Eligible Students	Total Student Loans	Take up Rate
Belfast IFHE	1261	804	64%
East Antrim	38	17	45%
Fermanagh College	101	48	48%
Lisburn IFHE	60	26	43%

Further Education Institution	No. of Eligible Students	Total Student Loans	Take up Rate
NI Hotel Catering College	200	85	43%
Newry & Kilkeel IHFE	121	45	37%
North Down & Ards	371	160	43%
North East IFHE	153	58	38%
North West IFHE	469	270	58%
Upper Bann	131	51	39%

TABLE 2 YEAR 1999-2000

Further Education Institution	No. of Eligible Students	Total Student Loans	Take up Rate
Belfast IFHE	1334	1049	79%
East Antrim	40	30	75%
East Down	11	7	64%
Fermanagh College	110	73	66%
Lisburn IFHE	61	39	64%
NI Hotel Catering College	180	114	63%
Newry & Kilkeel IHFE	164	104	63%
North Down & Ards	403	249	62%
North East IFHE	161	86	53%
North West IFHE	501	377	75%
Upper Bann	154	106	69%

TABLE 3 YEAR 2000-2001

Further Education Institution	No. of Eligible Students	Total Student Loans	Take up Rate
Belfast IFHE	1367	1167	85%
East Antrim	40	29	73%
East Down	17	11	65%
Fermanagh College	129	97	75%
Lisburn IFHE	59	44	75%
NI Hotel Catering College	179	138	77%
Newry & Kilkeel IHFE	204	138	68%
North Down & Ards	443	311	70%
North East IFHE	159	100	63%
North West IFHE	483	375	78%
Upper Bann	175	106	61%
Omagh	1	0	0%

TAKE UP RATE % OF FURTHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Institution	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	% increase in uptake rate between 1998-99 and 2000-01
Belfast IFHE	64%	79%	85%	21%
East Antrim	45%	75%	73%	28%

Institution	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	% increase in uptake rate between 1998-99 and 2000-01
East Down	0%	64%	65%	N/A
Fermanagh College	48%	66%	75%	27%
Lisburn IFHE	43%	64%	75%	32%
NI Hotel Catering College	43%	63%	77%	34%
Newry & Kilkeel IHFE	37%	63%	68%	31%
North Down & Ards	43%	62%	70%	27%
North East IFHE	38%	53%	63%	25%
North West IFHE	58%	75%	78%	20%
Upper Bann	39%	69%	61%	22%
Omagh	0%	0%	0%	N/A%

W&G Baird: Printing Costs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail, for her Department and associated agencies, (a) the total amount of money paid to W & G Baird for printing over the last 5 years; (b) if the work was tendered and awarded to the lowest tender; and (c) if there was any variation from the price quoted to the actual cost paid. (AQW 1598/01)

Ms Hanna: In the period since devolution my Department and associated agencies have not tendered to or awarded any work to W&G Baird.

New Deal Programme

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide a breakdown of the destinations of all those leaving each New Deal programme in each year since the inception of the programmes. (AQW 1602/01)

Ms Hanna: Since New Deal began in April 1998 a total of 23,813 participants had left the New Deal 18-24 programme up to August 2001. 43% of those whose destination is known found work. A total of 30,166 participants had left the New Deal 25+. 26% of those whose destination is known found work.

Detailed figures for the known destination of participants on the New Deal for 50+ are not currently available but I will provide you with a corresponding table of destinations as soon as possible.

I have arranged to have tables providing a breakdown of the known destinations of all those leaving New Deal broken down by programme and year to be placed in the Assembly library for your information.

Domiciled Students

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 1080/01, if she will undertake to provide information to school leavers applying for 3rd level education courses in other EU countries, such as the Republic of Ireland, on additional costs, such as medical ones, which they may incur when domiciled outside the UK. (AQW 1609/01)

Ms Hanna: NI domiciled students who choose to study outside the UK and the ROI are not eligible for support under the Education (Student Support) (Northern Ireland) Regulations. Under EU legislation such students can apply to the host country for limited assistance towards the cost of fees. General information on studying in other EU countries is available to potential students and schools from my Department's Careers Occupational Information Unit. This guidance will be included in the "Financial Support for Higher Education Students" booklet for the 2002/03 academic year.

New Deal Advisers

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the current number and percentage of vacancies of New Deal advisers; and (b) any action being taken to ensure these posts are filled. (AQW 1625/01)

Ms Hanna: The current number of New Deal advisers is 159 and the percentage of vacancies is 7%. These vacancies have been accorded priority and are currently being addressed by internal transfers, promotions, importing from other departments and direct recruitment.

Appointments to Quangos

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the standards expected of individuals appointed to quangos for which she is responsible. (AQW 1636/01)

Ms Hanna: Following appointment, all Department of Employment & Learning Non Departmental Public Bodies (NDPB) Board Members receive relevant information to assist them in carrying out their roles, in line with recommendations made by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (previously the Nolan Committee, now the Neill Committee). This information includes Codes of Practice which are based on Cabinet Office guidelines with which they are required to comply.

Student Loans

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students attending university or further education college (i) applied for; and (ii) received

a student loan in each of the past 5 years, showing the average amount borrowed and expressed as a percentage of total number of students for that year. (AQW 1651/01)

Ms Hanna: Prior to 1998, the information is not available in the form required. I enclose relevant information for the last 3 complete academic years.

STUDENT LOANS:

ACADEMIC YEARS: 1998/99-2000/01. TOTAL AMOUNT OF LOANS MADE/NUMBER OF LOANS ISSUED/ AVERAGE VALUE OF LOAN FOR NORTHERN IRELAND DOMICILED FULL-TIME STUDENTS AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN UK AND ROI.

Academic Year	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001
Total amount of Loans £	10,877,288.00	53,636,493.82	79,686,052.50
Total number of loans made	4,350	17,686	26,378
Average Amount of Loan made £	2,500	3,032	3,020
Total number of students	37,449	37,870	39,133
% of students taking out a loan	11.6	46.7	67.4

Individual Learning Accounts

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what contingency plans are in place to provide ongoing support to life-long learners who have not yet activated their individual learning accounts following the suspension of the ILA Scheme. (AQW 1727/01)

Ms Hanna: In announcing the suspension of the ILA programme to allow for its review, Sean Farren asked the Further Education Colleges, learndirect centres, and other community based learning providers to extend their provisions during the suspension, particularly to those who are socially or educationally disadvantaged. The learndirect free-phone helpline gives impartial advice on these and other learning opportunities, and on the financial and other support that may be available.

Individual Learning Accounts

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many life-long learners have been affected by the closure of the Individual Learning Account Scheme. (AQW 1728/01)

Ms Hanna: It is impossible to say exactly how many Individual Learning Account holders had intended to

use their Accounts following the closure of the scheme. Where such cases are known to the Department, my officials will write to the persons concerned explaining the position and the options open to them. To date, some 1,100 such letters have been sent.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Inward Investment

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on changes in trends in inward investment into Northern Ireland in the last six months. (AQW 1527/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The downturn in leading global economies, exacerbated by the events of September 11, has resulted in an unprecedented reduction in available mobile inward investment opportunities.

In addition the average size of projects in employment terms has also reduced significantly. Our competitors are also experiencing these factors. The technology communications and aerospace sectors have been particularly badly affected. Levels of business investment have fallen steeply as companies have either postponed or abandoned proposals.

The depth and duration of the global downturn is uncertain.

Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he plans any specific action in response to the recent findings by the Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre that small firms in Northern Ireland are performing at a level 10% below similar firms in the Irish Republic in terms of export. (AQW 1591/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The study in question does not include the Republic of Ireland as an export market, and therefore discounts the largest and fastest growing export market for those small businesses assisted by the Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU).

Another recent study carried out by NIERC showed that over the period 1996-99, the growth rates of LEDU assisted manufacturing clients were almost three times higher than the Northern Ireland and UK average, as well as outperforming their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland.

LEDU has been proactive in terms of assisting small businesses to sell outside Northern Ireland. A range of programmes is in place to provide businesses with the support and encouragement they need to identify and exploit new market opportunities.

Committee on Standards in Public Life

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the standards expected of individuals appointed to quangos for which he is responsible.

(AQW 1634/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Following appointment, all Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) Non Departmental Public Body (NDPB) Board members receive relevant and timely information to assist them in carrying out their role, in line with recommendations made by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (previously the Nolan Committee, now the Neill Committee).

This information includes a copy of the Code of Best Practice for Board Members which each NDPB has, and which takes account of the 'Guidance on Codes of Best Practice for Board Members of Public Bodies', incorporated in the White Paper 'The Governance of Public Bodies: A Progress Report' published in February 1997.

The 'Guidance on Codes of Practice for Board Members of Public Bodies' suggests a framework which covers such issues as the Role of the Chair and Chief Executive; the corporate and individual responsibilities of Board Members in ensuring high standards of propriety and governance; handling conflicts of interest, including the keeping of registers and the legal restrictions in taking part in decisions; board members' political activities; personal liability, and issues of openness and responsiveness.

Ulster Way

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has for promoting the Ulster Way as a tourist attraction. (AQW 1663/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board makes reference to the Ulster Way in its publication "Information Guide to Walking in Northern Ireland".

The Tourist Board is also taking part in the Working Group which is reviewing the future of the Ulster Way and which is to bring forward proposals in mid 2002.

Promotion of the route as a tourist attraction will be adjusted in light of the recommendations and actions that flow from the review.

Grant Assistance

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of employment reversals at Solectron and C-Mac, and given the relatively high unemployment levels in Carrickfergus, would he undertake to review the current levels of grant aid available for new investors by District Council area.

(AQW 1761/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Levels of grant assistance are determined according to that required to secure projects for Northern Ireland and on the basis of assessments that the grant will leverage a net benefit to the economy, and that the amounts offered are within European limits. Enhanced rates of assistance may be offered to projects locating in New Targeting Social Need (TSN) areas, if required.

DETI's list of Council areas which have been designated as New TSN does not presently include Carrickfergus. However, the Department is currently reviewing its approach to New TSN areas as part of the 2002 update of its New TSN Action Plan.

Solectron, Carrickfergus

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his plans to address the serious impact on the employment situation in Carrickfergus and East Antrim brought about by the prospect of redundancies at the Solectron and C-Mac plants.

(AQW 1762/01)

Sir Reg Empey: As Selection/C-Mac have now merged and trade under the Solectron name, IDB will work with Solectron to explore ways in which the local operation can start to grow again. This will include developing relationships with the parent company to position Northern Ireland as a preferred site for other mobile projects within the corporation.

In conjunction with Carrickfergus Enterprise Agency, Local Economic Development Unit (LEDU) will contact Solectron to seek management agreement to hold a counselling session on site. This will include representatives from Department of Employment and Learning (DEL), Department of Social Development (DSD) and Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and was viewed as beneficial by employees involved in previous closures – AVX and Insilco.

All IDB client companies are encouraged to use the range of programmes available to improve their international competitiveness through business excellence and to increase international trade. A number of companies within the East Antrim constituency have made use of these initiatives including undertaking competitiveness assessments and participating on Market Access Visits to Europe, USA and Canada.

IDB will continue to market the East Antrim area to potential investors. In the period April 1998 to date, there have been 75 first time and 19 repeat visits by potential investors to the East Antrim area – 25 of which were to the Carrickfergus Borough Council area.

I also understand that the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) have established a Working Group to assess the economic impact of actual and potential redundancies in the local economy which will consider ways in which DEL can also respond to the resulting difficulties, identifying additional resources required as appropriate. Officials from my department through IDB, LEDU, Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU) and the Company Development Programme are represented in this Group.

Solectron

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline any discussions he had with Solectron to prevent job losses at the factory, and to give his assessment of the commercial viability of Solectron.

(AQW 1772/01)

Sir Reg Empey: I have met with Solectron and when the merger between Solectron and C-Mac was announced I personally wrote to top management to reinforce government support for the Northern Ireland operations. More recently I have maintained close contact through my officials who had a number of meetings with the company offering assistance to minimise the local impact of the global downturn in the electronics market. The company's decision was made on commercial grounds and the job losses are very much regretted.

Solectron, with Headquarters in Silicon Valley, California is a \$16 billion global operation and the world's largest electronic manufacturing services company. Despite the job losses Solectron remains committed to Northern Ireland and is consolidating its operations into a new factory building at Carrickfergus. My Department will continue to work closely with the company to explore ways in which we can encourage the company to grow again here.

Solectron Corporation also owns Stream International, a successful call centre operation employing 650 people in Londonderry.

Redundancies: East Antrim

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW632/01, to detail (a) what measures have been put in place to reverse the trend of redundancy in East Antrim; and (b) what measures will be taken to attract new industry to the area.

(AQW 1773/01)

Sir Reg Empey:

- (a) All IDB client companies are encouraged to use the range of programmes available to improve their international competitiveness through business excellence and to increase international trade. A number of companies within the East Antrim constituency have made use of these initiatives and companies such as FG Wilson, Getty Connections and LB Meat Products have participated on Market Access Visits to Europe, USA and Canada, whilst others have undertaken competitiveness assessments.

Small businesses account for 97.5% of the total business base and 58.4% of employment in the Carrickfergus Borough. There are 18 small companies actively exporting from NI and these employ 407. In Larne, small businesses account for 99.1% of the total business base and 58.4% of employment. There are 27 businesses in Larne actively exporting and these employ 283 people. Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU) is working with the small indigenous businesses in both the Larne and Carrickfergus boroughs to secure employment and deliver growth in export markets.

- (b) IDB will continue to market the East Antrim area to potential investors. In the period April 1998 to date, there have been 75 first time and 19 repeat visits by potential investors to the East Antrim area. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) continues to promote investment by undertaking marketing activity and through the provision of financial assistance for marketing and development projects. The NITB will continue to work with the Councils and local tourism providers to promote tourism in the East Antrim area.

LEDU is also working closely with Carrickfergus and Larne Councils and Carrickfergus Enterprise Agency and LEDCOM in respect of a number of business development and start-up programmes. LEDCOM has recently developed a Fresh Start Enterprise Programme on behalf of LEDU which will target those affected by redundancy.

The NITB continues to promote investment by undertaking marketing activity and through the provision of financial assistance for marketing and development projects. The NITB will continue to work with the Councils and local tourism providers to promote tourism in the East Antrim area.

Unemployment: East Antrim

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment he has made in relation to the current level of unemployment in East Antrim.
(AQW 1774/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Unemployment statistics at Parliamentary Constituency level are only available from the claimant count and the most up-to-date figures available relate to December 2001.

Details of claimant count unemployment in East Antrim Parliamentary Constituency Area and a comparison with Northern Ireland as a whole can be found in Table 1 overleaf.

Over the year to December 2001, claimant unemployment in East Antrim Parliamentary Constituency Area fell by 1.0% (18 claimants) compared to a fall of 8.5% (3,377 claimants) in Northern Ireland as a whole.

Of the 18 Parliamentary Constituencies, East Antrim had the sixth highest unemployment rate at December 2001.

While the percentage unemployed for East Antrim is higher than for Northern Ireland as a whole, my Department, through IDB and LEDU, and, when it is established, the new economic development agency Invest Northern Ireland, will continue to work with companies and with the local councils and enterprise agencies in the area to promote further economic activity and employment in the area.

TABLE 1
NUMBER AND RATE OF CLAIMANT COUNT UNEMPLOYED IN EAST ANTRIM PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA AND NORTHERN IRELAND AT DECEMBER 2001.

	Number			% of workforce		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
East Antrim	1,413	456	1,869	7.1	2.9	5.2
Northern Ireland	28,300	8,287	36,587	6.4	2.4	4.6

Fibre Optic Industry

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment he has made in relation to the current potential for further job losses in the fibre optic industry.
(AQW 1776/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The wider telecommunications industry of which fibre optics forms a part has suffered the most dramatic downturn in its history over the past twelve months. The most recent forecasts indicate that an upturn is not anticipated until the end of this year at the very earliest with the intervening period expected to be a difficult time.

There have been significant job losses in this sector over recent months and our assessment is that locally most organisations have taken the action necessary to reach levels that are relatively sustainable. If however in the short term the market deteriorates further than expected then further job losses cannot be ruled out.

In the longer term there is universal agreement that demand for bandwidth will increase and growth will return to this sector.

ENVIRONMENT

Staff Transfers: DVTA

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the number of requests submitted by full-time employees in the Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency for transfers to another Department; and (b) the number of transfers granted in each of the last 5 years for which figures are available. (AQW 1523/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): My Department does not maintain historical information on staff transfers requested and granted. However the number of full-time employees in the Agency currently seeking a transfer to another Department is 29. This represents 7% of the Agency's staff complement.

Staff requests for transfer to another Department are managed through the Northern Ireland Civil Service Central Transfer List. I understand, however, that the Central Transfer List system does not maintain historical information on the numbers of applications received, or transfers made.

Cyclist Accidents

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the level of accidents involving cyclists without appropriate illumination over the past 5 years. (AQW 1524/01)

Mr Foster: The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) which is responsible for the collection of road traffic collision statistics in Northern Ireland, has advised that there have been no recorded collisions during the period 1 April 1996 – 31 March 2001 (the last period for which detailed statistics are available) involving pedal cycles having no lights, nor insufficient or defective lights.

During that period there were 1510 collisions involving pedal cyclists resulting in 1534 pedal cycle casualties.

Details of collisions are as follows: -

	Collisions	Killed	Serious	Slight	Total
1996/97	341	5	51	292	348
1997/98	291	5	53	244	302
1999/00	276	-	53	226	279
2000/01	260	5	52	205	262
Totals	1510	22	268	1244	1534

Provisional PSNI figures from 1 April 2001 to 31 December 2001 indicate that 167 pedal cyclists have been injured in 164 road traffic collisions.

Waiting Time: Vehicle Test

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what is the current timescale from the date of application to the actual MOT test in each of the Vehicle Test Centres. (AQW 1538/01)

Mr Foster: The average waiting time for a vehicle test at each of the Driver & Vehicle Testing Agency's test centres in week ending 26 January 2002 was as follows.

Centre	Average Waiting Time (Days)
Armagh	22
Ballymena	15
Belfast	14
Coleraine	6
Cookstown	16
Craigavon	16
Downpatrick	21
Enniskillen	19
Larne	Closed for installation of new equipment
Lisburn	
Londonderry	16
Mallusk	13
Newry	14
Newtownards	14
Omagh	15

Waiting Time: Driving Test

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what is the current timescale from the date of application to the driving test date at each of the Vehicle Test Centres. (AQW 1539/01)

Mr Foster: The average waiting time for a driving test at each of the Driver & Vehicle Testing Agency's test centres in week ending 26 January 2002 was as follows.

Centre	Average Waiting Time (Days)
Armagh	15
Ballymena	18
Belfast	12
Coleraine	21
Cookstown	14
Craigavon	19
Downpatrick	18

Centre	Average Waiting Time (Days)
Enniskillen	12
Larne	11
Lisburn	17
Londonderry	17
Newry	13
Newtownards	14
Omagh	21

Public Service Vehicle Driving Licence

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what is the current timescale to process a Public Service Vehicle Driving Licence. (AQW 1540/01)

Mr Foster: The current average timescale for processing a Public Service Vehicle Driving Licence (Taxis) is eight weeks.

The current average timescale for processing a Public Service Vehicle Driving Licence (Buses) is eight weeks where a medical condition requires investigation. Where there are no medical conditions a first application may be issued in six weeks and a renewal of an application in three weeks.

These timescales reflects the fact that some of the processes associated with the issue of such licences are outside the control of the Department.

Public Service Vehicle Licence

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what is the current timescale to process a Public Service Vehicle Licence at each of the Vehicle Test Centres. (AQW 1541/01)

Mr Foster: The current timescale to process a Public Service Vehicle Licence at each vehicle test centre is not currently measured as an end-to-end process.

When applications are received they are processed initially by Driver and Vehicle Licensing, Northern Ireland. Applications are then passed to the Driver & Vehicle Testing Agency for arrangement of the roadworthiness test. The Agency is currently meeting its target of 19 days for this stage of the process.

When the roadworthiness test has been completed the application is returned to Driver & Vehicle Licensing Northern Ireland for the issue of a Public Service Vehicle Licence. The target set for this stage of the process is to issue 90% of licences within 21 days of receipt of all documentation. Currently 92% are completed within this timescale.

Waste Management Strategy

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment what level of funding will be provided to District Councils in order to implement the new Waste Management Strategy. (AQW 1557/01)

Mr Foster: My Department has paid £45,000 to the North West Region Cross Border Group and has offered £82,000 to the Eastern Region Waste Management Group to assist with the development of their Waste Management Plans.

In addition, I have recently approved a waste management grant scheme that will disburse £2m to Councils in the current financial year, from my Department's remaining £2.5m waste management budget.

My Department proposes to spend the remaining £0.5m on further waste data surveys, on extending the GB Waste to Resources Action Programme (WRAP) to Northern Ireland, on a public awareness campaign associated with the public consultation stage of the Councils' Waste Management Plans, and on education.

The allocation in my Department's budget for 2002/03 is £7.4m. I have not yet taken a decision on how much of this allocation will be provided to District Councils and how much will be applied to other waste management activities. Whilst it is intended that future funding for waste management will be disbursed in a broadly similar way to this year's scheme, the detail of any future scheme will be informed by experience of the current scheme.

Traffic Speed Cameras

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment if he will make a statement on his policy on traffic speed cameras. (AQW 1579/01)

Mr Foster: Operational policy in relation to traffic speed cameras is a matter for the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. My Department is responsible for co-ordinating a strategic approach to road safety by the local departments and agencies involved, including the Police Service. This includes tackling the major causes of deaths and serious injuries on our roads; namely, excessive and inappropriate speed, drink-driving and failure to wear seatbelts.

The effectiveness of speed cameras as a deterrent to speeding is already well established. It is clear that increased use of cameras to detect excessive speed, properly targeted at locations with a history of speed related casualties, is highly effective in reducing the number and severity of road collisions.

In April 2000, pilot schemes for new funding arrangements for the use of safety cameras (speed cameras and red light running cameras) began in eight police areas in Great Britain. The schemes permitted the cost

of operating fixed and mobile safety cameras to be netted off the fixed penalty fines for speeding and red light offences detected by those cameras. The pilot schemes showed a significant reduction in the number of collisions and casualties at safety camera sites. Consequently the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions announced in August 2001 that the cost recovery scheme for safety cameras would be extended throughout Great Britain over the following three years.

My Department is currently in discussion with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service and other departments and agencies in Northern Ireland, on how best the lessons from the pilot Safety Camera Netting-Off Schemes in Great Britain can be applied in Northern Ireland.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of the Environment why there was no data available to analyse the sexual orientation category while an Equality Impact Assessment was being conducted on the proposals for a new methodology for distribution of the General Exchequer Grant to District Councils. (AQW 1604/01)

Mr Foster: No datasets exist, at District Council level or at Northern Ireland level, to analyse the impact on the Section 75 sexual orientation category of proposals for a new formula for distribution of the resources element of General Exchequer Grant. At the screening stage of the assessment, however, a potential differential impact in this area was not identified. This was confirmed by the fact that no difficulties were raised by any of the groups representing the sexual orientation category who were consulted about the proposals. Efforts would have been made to collect data by survey, research or consultation if a differential impact had been anticipated.

Gaps in data relating to Section 75 Groups, such as sexual orientation, which raises confidentiality problems, are being addressed by the Department's Equality Scheme and cross-departmentally.

Free-Standing Advertising Boards

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to take steps to ban, or to bring under control, the rapid increase in the use of free-standing advertising boards on roads. (AQW 1612/01)

Mr Foster: My Department has powers under the Planning (NI) Order 1991 to take proceedings against any person who displays advertisements in contravention of the Planning (Control of Advertisements) Regulations (NI) 1992.

'Planning Policy Statement 9 - The Enforcement of Planning Control', states that the Department has a general discretion to take enforcement action against a breach of planning control when it regards it as expedient to do so, having regard to the provisions of the relevant development plan and any other material consideration.

My Department's Planning Service is aware of the growing extent of this problem and has commenced enforcement action on a number of cases to seek the removal of a number of unauthorised signs.

My colleague Peter Robinson, the Minister for Regional Development, has advised that, where advertising hoardings are erected illegally on Roads Service property, or adjacent to special roads, his Department's Roads Service will normally take action in an attempt to secure their removal under Articles 87 and 21 respectively of the Roads (NI) Order 1993.

W&G Baird: Printing Costs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, for his Department and associated agencies, (a) the total amount of money paid to W & G Baird for printing over the last 5 years; (b) if the work was tendered and awarded to the lowest tender; and (c) if there was any variation from the price quoted to the actual cost paid. (AQW 1615/01)

Mr Foster: A total of £6,703.00 was paid directly to W & G Baird by DOE for printing since devolution (ie between 1 December 1999 and 31 December 2001).

The individual amounts paid were as follows:

INVOICE DATE INVOICE AMOUNT

INVOICE DATE	INVOICE AMOUNT
30/03/00	£5,683.00
20/04/00	£650.00
12//06/00	£370.00

Due to the value of individual invoices no formal tendering was required as this is only mandatory where the value of the purchase exceeds £15,000 (in accordance with EHS Purchasing Procedure as approved by NI Audit Office and Internal Audit).

During the period in question DOE sourced a number of contracts through the Government Purchasing Agency (GPA). A number of these were placed with Corporate Document Services, a member of the W & G Baird Group. As DOE had no direct involvement in the placing of these contracts we are unable to provide the detailed breakdown sought.

Regional Development Strategy

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the criteria used for the allocation of brown-

field and greenfield sites for residential and factory development. (AQW 1630/01)

Mr Foster: The Regional Development Strategy sets an aspirational target of 60% of new urban housing growth in Northern Ireland to be accommodated within the existing urban areas. The potential for achieving the target for individual houses will be assessed through the development plan process using urban capacity studies.

There is no corresponding target for the distribution of industrial land between brownfield and greenfield sites. The suitability of individual sites will be assessed against all prevailing and relevant planning policies which embody the principles of sustainability and New Targeting Social Need.

In emerging development plans the focus will be on sites within the urban fabric in line with the Regional Development Strategy by adopting a sequential approach to the allocation of land for housing which uses a search sequence focused first on the reuse of previously developed land and buildings and consideration of previously undeveloped land within the existing urban area before deciding the location and scale of settlement extensions on greenfield sites.

The suitability of individual sites for housing will be assessed against all prevailing and relevant planning policies. Planning Policy Statement 7 – Quality Residential Environments – provides a policy context against which proposals for housing will be considered including their relationship with existing development. This embodies the Government's commitment to sustainable development and the Quality Initiative.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the cost of consultancy for the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan. (AQW 1631/01)

Mr Foster: Consultancy work in relation to the preparation of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) is projected to cost some £400,000 over an 18 month period which started in October 2001.

This work includes specialist research into areas such as retailing, the office sector, urban design, tourism, built heritage and housing. It also involves provision for an inclusive and wide-ranging consultation process, which is necessary to ensure the public have an opportunity to influence the plan making process.

Definition of Brownfield Sites

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the definition of brownfield sites for planning purposes. (AQW 1632/01)

Mr Foster: The final Regional Development Strategy prepared by the Department for Regional Development sets a target that 60% of urban housing growth in NI should be provided within the limits of existing urban areas. Potential housing sites within existing urban areas include both undeveloped lands and 'brownfield' sites.

For planning purposes my Department defines 'brownfield' sites as lands which have been previously developed for other uses and which have potential for reuse for other purposes, in particular housing use; and buildings which are now redundant and available for redevelopment or conversion.

I understand that the Department for Regional Development will be giving consideration to a more precise definition of 'brownfield' in the context of the preparation of a Planning Policy Statement on Housing and Settlements. My Department will input to that process.

Urban Capacity Study

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the results of the Urban Capacity Study Brownfield Sites in the Carrickfergus area. (AQW 1639/01)

Mr Foster: The Regional Development Strategy has set a regional target that 60% of housing growth should be provided within existing urban areas. The capacity of individual cities and towns is assessed through the development plan process by the preparation of urban capacity studies.

An Urban Capacity Study is presently being carried out as part of the preparation of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan.

To achieve the RDS objective of maximising the output of new housing from existing urban areas, it requires the endorsement of the statutory process. It will therefore form part of the Draft Plan which is due to be published before 31 March 2003.

Given its relationship to the process of identifying and zoning lands for development, it would be inappropriate to release the Study in advance of the publication of proposals.

Urban Capacity Study Waste Management

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the results of the Urban Capacity Study Waste Management in the Carrickfergus area. (AQW 1640/01)

Mr Foster: An urban capacity study is being carried out by my Department in the context of the preparation of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan. This study is being conducted to ascertain the potential of existing urban areas within the Belfast Metropolitan Area to accommodate new development. It will form part of the draft Plan, which is due to be published before 31 March 2002.

Ulster Way

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has for promoting the Ulster Way.

(AQW 1664/01)

Mr Foster: My Department has no direct responsibility for the promotion of the Ulster Way. This is mainly within the remit of those district councils through whose area the route passes. I understand that some councils promote their individual sections. I understand also that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board promotes the route in some of its publications.

My Department has a general role in promoting and facilitating sustainable access to the countryside and is therefore concerned about the future viability of the Ulster Way, including the fact that it currently has no managing body or structure. To address this and other issues, a study has been commissioned through the Countryside Access and Activities Network, an independent body, and this is expected to begin soon. All interested organisations and individuals will be invited to contribute their views through a widely publicised consultation process. You may find the enclosed copies of a recently-produced information leaflet helpful.

Badger Sett, Cloughey

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 1256/01, to detail how officers of the Environment and Heritage Service intend to monitor the development relating to planning application X/2000/0226/RO, and the manner in which the PSNI will be contacted in order to enforce Article 10 of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. (AQW 1668/01)

Mr Foster: The developer will contact EHS before the start of any works on the site.

An EHS representative will be present at the start of the work and will ensure that the agreed measures are undertaken to ensure the safety of the badger sett.

The EHS representative will visit the site during the construction of the reinforced concrete base to monitor the progress of the work.

Any breaches of the agreed conditions that constitute an offence under the terms of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 will be reported immediately by telephone to the PSNI.

Listed Buildings: Demolition

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment if he could outline the location of listed buildings which have undergone (a) authorised demolition; and (b) unauthorised demolition in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 1685/01)

Mr Foster:

(a) The demolition of the following listed buildings (or parts of same) has been authorised by the Department in the last five years:

1997
93 Old Kilmore Road, Moira
St Mary's College Trench House, Belfast
Bushmills Distillery, Bushmills
1998
19 English Street, Downpatrick
20 Saul Street, Downpatrick
Glenmore House, Lisburn
46B Molesworth Street, Cookstown
Collegiate Grammar School, Enniskillen
19 Church Street, Gracehill
18-26 Bridge Street, Coleraine
28 Bridge St, 2-6 Hanover Place, Coleraine *
1, 3 & 5 Kingsgate Street, 2 & 4 Society Street, Coleraine
354 Antrim Road, Belfast
43 Upper English Street, Armagh
Town Hall, Limavady
Stuart Place, Dungannon
1999
Marquis of Downshire, Hillsborough
6 Joymount, Carrickfergus
Victoria House, Banbridge
30 Main Street, Loughgall
15 College Street, Armagh
352 Antrim Road, Belfast
2 Main Street, Clough
2000
2 St Judes Avenue, Belfast
21 Kilmorey Street, Newry
4 Greenpark Road, Rostrevor
Tully Mill, Florencecourt
3 Art Road, Artigarvan
2001
180 & 182 Lurgan Road, Magheralin
31 and 33 Main Street, Bushmills
Aldrin, Mark Street, Lurgan *
University of Ulster, Londonderry
The Gaol Tower, Londonderry

* denotes buildings where Listed Building Consent was granted retrospectively, following extensive fire damage.

- (b) The following listed buildings were demolished without the Department's authorisation in each of the last five years:

1997
57-57A and 59-63 Court Street, Newtownards
1999
Chapelfield (Parochial House), Coleraine
2000
Mount St Columb, Warrenpoint
Rock Castle, Portstewart
34 Upper English Street Armagh
Partial demolition of a building within the curtilage of Jennymount Mill, Belfast.

Listed Building Consent Applications

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of listed building consent applications which have been lodged with the Planning Service in each of the last five years. (AQW 1686/01)

Mr Foster: Details of the number of listed building consent applications which have been lodged with the Planning Service in each of the last five years are set out below:

1997	285
1998	303
1999	347
2000	273
2001	314

Listed Buildings

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the criteria used for selecting listed buildings; and (b) the benchmarks against which the criteria are assessed. (AQW 1687/01)

Mr Foster: Under the Planning (NI) Order 1991, my Department is charged with listing buildings of "special architectural or historic interest". The criteria used for listing buildings are published in my Department's Planning Policy Statement 6: 'Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage'. These criteria are similar to those used by English Heritage.

The merits of each building are measured against these listing criteria and against comparable buildings; and they are assessed by Environment and Heritage Service conservation architects, with a view to a listing proposal. The proposal is then subject to statutory consultation with the Historic Buildings Council and the relevant district council, before my Department makes a final decision.

Second Survey of Historic Buildings

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the proposed timetable for the completion of the survey to (a) re-assess current listed buildings; and (b) identify additional buildings worthy of listing.

(AQW 1688/01)

Mr Foster: The Second Survey of Historic Buildings in Northern Ireland began in 1997. It assesses the status of currently listed buildings, and those buildings which are potentially worthy of listing, on a ward by ward basis.

The Second Survey is much more detailed than the First, which took 20 years to complete. The current and forthcoming years' targets are to process historic buildings data from 20 wards. It is estimated, based on experience and current resources, that it could take up to 20 years to complete the Second Survey.

In parallel, my Department carries out ad-hoc surveys on buildings which may merit listing. These surveys arise as a result of visits by my Department's conservation architects, or requests from owners, members of the public or interested bodies.

Appointment to Public Bodies

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the standards expected for individuals appointed to quangos for which he is responsible.

(AQW 1692/01)

Mr Foster: Individuals appointed to public bodies by my department are expected to be fully committed to the principles, values and standards of public life and be prepared to perform their duties accordingly.

They receive a copy of the HM Treasury paper 'Guidance on Codes of Best Practice for Board Members of Public Bodies'. It is made clear that they are expected to demonstrate impartiality, integrity, objectivity, good faith and act in the best interests of the public body.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment is the Planning Service giving consideration to the production of an Options Paper before the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan is produced. (AQW 1747/01)

Mr Foster: The Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) will be developed within the context of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) for Northern Ireland which sets out a clear structure for the future development of the Metropolitan Area.

The plan will develop this framework by identifying specific locations for future land use zonings and

formulating appropriate planning policies. Policies and proposals as they emerge will be discussed with both the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan Political Group and Steering Group and the 6 Councils in the Plan area, before the publication of the draft plan.

Following a review of development planning, which aimed to streamline the process and minimise delay in Plan preparation in order to ensure the provision of full up-to-date area plan coverage for Northern Ireland by 2005, the Department decided to replace the preliminary proposals stage of development plans with the publication of an Issues Paper. Area Plan consultation is now focused around the Issues Paper and involves public meetings throughout the Plan area at which everyone has the opportunity to express their views and hence influence the Plan preparation process. The Department has appointed consultants to draw in the views of the public to this process and 37 public meetings are being held as part of this consultation exercise.

Given the framework planned by RDS and the extensive consultation exercise the Department considers that an Options Paper would not add meaningfully to the Plan preparation process. Rather it would delay the BMAP process and indeed the overall timescale for completion of the Department's Plan Programme. Up-to-date area plan coverage is essential to ensure that there is sufficient development land to sustain the growth of the Northern Ireland economy. The Programme for Government commits the Department to publish 7 development plans in Draft form by the end of March 2003. BMAP is one of these.

Architectural Qualifications

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of the Environment how many qualified architects are employed by the Planning Service. (AQW 1770/01)

Mr Foster: Four professional planning officers have formal architectural qualifications.

Litter Wardens

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what is his policy in relation to making it compulsory for all councils to employ litter wardens with powers to impose penalty fines. (AQW 1788/01)

Mr Foster: I have no plans at present to make it compulsory for district councils to employ litter wardens.

The offences of leaving litter or permitting dogs to foul in prescribed places are defined in Articles 3 and 4 of the Litter (Northern Ireland) Order 1994. District councils may appoint "authorised officers" to enforce the penalties under these Articles. The "authorised officers" have powers to institute proceedings through

the Magistrates Court or issue fixed penalty notices to persons whom they believe have committed an offence. The maximum fine for littering is £2500, dog fouling is £500 and the fixed penalty for both offences is £25.

Renewable Energy Sources

Mr A Doherty asked the Minister of the Environment to consider the planning and environmental implications of the expansion of the provision of renewable energy sources, in particular land and sea-based wind generators; and to make a statement. (AQO 736/01)

Mr Foster: The main policy guidance for renewable energy including land based wind farms is contained in 'A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland'. This states that Government policy is to stimulate the exploitation and development of renewable energy sources wherever they have prospects of being economically attractive and environmentally acceptable.

In respect of land based wind farms, the Strategy states that they will be assessed in respect of their implications for the visual, ecological and historic landscapes; the implications for agriculture; and the safety and amenity of local residents. It also makes it clear that permissions will not be granted within, or in any location where they would have a seriously detrimental impact on the amenity of, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or any area designated for its conservation, scientific, archaeological or historic interest.

Consultation on land based wind farm proposals will normally include the Environmental Health Department of the relevant local Council, my own Department's Environment and Heritage Service, the Department for Regional Development's Roads and Water Services, the Ministry of Defence, and the Civil Aviation Authority.

In addition, in certain circumstances under the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999 my Department may require an Environmental Statement in respect of a proposal for a land based wind farm.

Although a planning application is not required for an offshore development, any proposal for offshore wind generators will be subject to the Food and Environment Protection Act licensing process. In the UK, a licence would be required under Part 2 of the Food and Environment Protection Act 1985 (FEPA). In Northern Ireland, the licensing authority is the Environment and Heritage Service. The applicant would be required to produce an environmental assessment of the possible impacts to the marine environment. The application will also be subject to full consultation.

The full environmental impact analysis would be made available to Department for Enterprise, Trade

and Investment whenever the Article 39 consent is being considered.

Rural Dwellings: Planning Approval

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of rural dwellings which received planning approval in Fermanagh District Council area in each of the last 3 years. (AQO 759/01)

Mr Foster: A total of 442 applications for rural dwellings in the open countryside received planning approval in the Fermanagh District Council area in 1999, 528 received approval in 2000, and 452 received approval in 2001.

83% of applications received for rural dwellings in the open countryside in the Fermanagh District Council area were approved in 1999. In the years 2000 and 2001, 82% of such applications were approved.

These figures exclude villages and hamlets.

Secondment Policy: European Commission

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to increase the number of his Department's civil servants seconded to the European Commission. (AQO 731/01)

Mr Foster: EU environmental policy has a major influence on many of my department's activities and EU directives govern a significant element of local environmental legislation. It is important therefore for my staff to be aware of how the EU operates and of key developments.

Relevant secondment opportunities are circulated within my department. However, the benefits to be gained from these opportunities have to be weighed against the costs, both in terms of finance and also the loss of key members of staff. These costs can be very significant.

DFP and OFMDFM are currently working with all of the Northern Ireland departments to develop a new secondment policy. We are contributing to this review and will consider actions once it is completed. We are also looking at alternatives to secondments which might deliver some of the benefits, without the high associated costs.

Safety Camera Netting-Off Schemes

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment if there has been any investigations into the implementation of a Safety Camera Netting-Off Scheme. (AQO 723/01)

Mr Foster: In April 2000, pilot schemes for new funding arrangements for the use of safety cameras

began in eight police areas in Great Britain. The schemes permitted the cost of operating fixed and mobile safety cameras to be netted off the fixed penalty fines for speeding and red light offences detected by those cameras. The pilot schemes showed a significant reduction in the number of collisions and casualties at safety camera sites. Consequently the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions announced in August 2001 that the cost recovery scheme for safety cameras would be extended throughout Great Britain over the following three years.

My Department is currently in discussion with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service and other departments and agencies in Northern Ireland, on how best the lessons from the pilot Safety Camera Netting-Off Schemes in Great Britain can be applied in Northern Ireland.

This is not a straightforward matter. There are complexities arising from the different administrative structures in Northern Ireland, as well as the legal and constitutional arrangements under which some of the functions involved have been transferred to the devolved administration while others remain excepted or reserved to the United Kingdom Government. Nevertheless, I am determined that these complexities should be resolved so that Northern Ireland can benefit from the road safety improvements that safety cameras can provide.

I must emphasise, however, that excessive speed remains a major cause of road collisions in Northern Ireland. While safety cameras have a vitally important role to play in reducing deaths and serious injuries on our roads I would urge all drivers, at all times, to obey speed limits and reduce speed to suit prevailing conditions.

Revised Planning Regulations: Telecommunication Masts

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) when the revised planning regulations with respect to telecommunications masts will be introduced; and (b) when will they take effect. (AQO 744/01)

Mr Foster: The revised planning regulations with respect to telecommunications development, including masts, will be brought forward in late February or March 2002 and are expected to take effect in April 2002.

The majority of telecommunications development is currently dealt with through the Prior Approval system as laid down in the Planning (General Development) Order (NI) 1993 as amended. Guidance on this system is contained in Development Control Advice Note 14 – second edition, published in May 2000. This encourages the sharing of masts and other structures where appropriate.

At the same time as introducing the new legislation, I will publish a revised Planning Policy Statement on telecommunications, a draft of which issued for consultation in November 2000. This seeks to ensure that all new telecommunications apparatus, including masts, are developed at locations, or in ways, which minimise environmental and visual impact. Considerable importance is attached to keeping the numbers of radio and telecommunications masts, and the sites for such installations, to a minimum.

Revised Planning Regulations: Telecommunication Masts

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of the Environment what strategies are in place to restrict the proliferation of telecommunications masts throughout the country. (AQO 760/01)

Mr Foster: The revised planning regulations with respect to telecommunications development, including masts, will be brought forward in late February or March 2002 and are expected to take effect in April 2002.

The majority of telecommunications development is currently dealt with through the Prior Approval system as laid down in the Planning (General Development) Order (NI) 1993 as amended. Guidance on this system is contained in Development Control Advice Note 14 – second edition, published in May 2000. This encourages the sharing of masts and other structures where appropriate.

At the same time as introducing the new legislation, I will publish a revised Planning Policy Statement on telecommunications, a draft of which issued for consultation in November 2000. This seeks to ensure that all new telecommunications apparatus, including masts, are developed at locations, or in ways, which minimise environmental and visual impact. Considerable importance is attached to keeping the numbers of radio and telecommunications masts, and the sites for such installations, to a minimum.

West Tyrone Area Plan

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment when will officers be appointed to conduct the development plans for Omagh and Strabane; and to make a statement. (AQO 728/01)

Mr Foster: Work is likely to commence on the preparation of a single area plan for the Districts of Omagh and Strabane, to be called the West Tyrone Area Plan, in spring 2002.

Responsibility for undertaking the early stage of the preparation will rest with Planning Service Head-

quarters, who are currently working on other development plans.

Following completion of this early stage of preparation, responsibility for undertaking all remaining stages will pass directly to the Omagh Divisional Planning Office.

Badger Sett: Massey Avenue, Belfast

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of the Environment if the restrictions imposed at a development at Cloughey, Co Down will apply to the proposed development at 33 Massey Avenue, Belfast in view of the presence of a badger sett. (AQO 754/01)

Mr Foster: Badgers and their underground tunnels or setts are protected under the terms of the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985. Any disturbance of badgers, damage to or destruction of a sett may only be carried out under licence from the Environment and Heritage Service.

Planning Service consults the Environment and Heritage Service on nature conservation issues relative to development proposals. When there is any indication that badgers are present on a proposed development site, EHS, through Planning Service, request the developer to commission a specialist badger survey.

The restrictions relating to these two developments were imposed following the usual consultation with the Environment and Heritage Service, and are site specific in that they reflect the particular characteristics of each site.

At the Cloughey site, because the badger sett and the "no development zone" extend across the whole of the access to the site, a concrete deck which completely bridges the sett has been approved.

At 33 Massey Avenue, the development plans have been modified so that the "no development zone" around the badger sett will remain intact and unaffected by the development.

In addition, the proposed development scheme was reduced from six apartments to three to take account of the sett.

Waste Management Strategy

Mr Close asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the breakdown of money allocated to the 3 council groups for the Waste Management Strategy in this financial year. (AQO 733/01)

Mr Foster: My Department has to date paid £45,000 to the North West Region Cross Border Group and has offered £82,000 to the Eastern Region Waste Management Group to assist with the development of their Waste Management Plans.

In addition, I recently approved a Waste Management Grant Scheme that will disburse £2m to Councils in the current financial year, from my Department's remaining £2.5m waste management budget.

The Scheme provides funding for activities which will help Councils to meet the objectives and targets in the Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy and also in the development of their Waste Management Plans. Councils may undertake these activities individually or collectively through the Partnership Groups. Under the scheme, the grants will be disbursed on a population basis, weighted according to sparsity, household numbers, tourists and travel to work numbers. A copy of the scheme was sent to all Councils on 14 January 2002. I will arrange for a copy to be sent to the Member.

The provisional allocations to Councils in the North West Group total £372,200, in the Southern Group £537,200 and in the Eastern Group £1,090,600.

To the extent that the allocation to any Council or Group cannot be used in full this year, the balance will be available for redistribution to the other Council Groups. This process is not yet complete.

Arrangements are also made under the scheme to ensure that any Council unable to use its 2001/2 allocation in full will not be financially disadvantaged in the long term.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Prospects for the Construction Industry

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will make a statement on the prospects for the construction industry. (AQW 1560/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): Information in the Northern Ireland Construction Bulletin, which is published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, indicates that in the period from 1995 to 2000 there was a general increase in the value of Construction output.

Although final outturn figures for 2001 will not be available until 25 April 2002, I am aware from representations made by the Construction Employers Federation and the Construction Industry Group that the industry has concerns about perceived reductions in output and enquiries for new work in the last quarter of 2001 and I anticipate meeting representatives from both bodies in the near future to discuss these concerns.

Civil Servants: Retirement

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when a decision will be taken to increase

the age of retirement within the Civil Service from 60 to 65. (AQW 1580/01)

Dr Farren: No decision has yet been taken on future policy on age of retirement in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Consideration of a range of business and equality issues is ongoing and one element that will inform deliberations is the report of the independent team reviewing appointment and promotion procedures to the Senior Civil Service. Once that report is available an informed decision will be taken on the way forward.

Civil Servants: Retirement

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many civil servants will be required to retire at the age of 60 in the years 2002 and 2003. (AQW 1581/01)

Dr Farren: It is not possible to state definitively the number of staff who will be required to retire at age 60 in the years 2002 and 2003. This is because a number of staff are entitled to work beyond age 60 due to transitional arrangements which were introduced when the age of retirement was last changed in 1996 plus a number of staff may be retained beyond age 60 due to particular business needs.

Office of Law Reform: Physical Punishment

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why has the Office of Law Reform developed a general policy and issued a consultation document on physical punishment in the home when the judgement in *A v UK* was limited to the facts of that case. (AQW 1587/01)

Dr Farren: The Office of Law Reform has not developed a general policy on physical punishment in the home. A wide-ranging consultation has taken place from 11th September 2001 until 31st January 2002, and policy will only be developed when all responses to the consultation have been analysed and taken into account.

Although it is the usual practice of the European Court of Human Rights to limit its examination to the specific facts of the case before it, it is normal legal practice to apply European case-law to a wider category of analogous situations.

W&G Baird: Printing Costs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, for his Department and associated agencies, (a) the total amount of money paid to W & G Baird for printing over the last 5 years; (b) if the work was tendered and awarded to the lowest tender; and (c) if there was any variation from the price quoted to the actual cost paid. (AQW 1597/01)

Dr Farren: I can confirm that the Department of Finance and Personnel have not used the services of W & G Baird Ltd in the period since Devolution.

Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the standards expected of individuals appointed to quangos for which he is responsible.

(AQW 1635/01)

Dr Farren: All appointments to executive NDPBs and HPSS bodies must conform with the Code of Practice and Guidelines published by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCA).

The Department of Finance and Personnel has no executive NDPBs or HPSS bodies. However it has responsibility for two Advisory NDPBs and the Lay Observer who do not fall within the remit of the OCA.

The Department is committed however, to the principles that form the basis of public appointments and applies the OCA Code of Practice and Guidelines as far as is practicable. Appointees are also expected to conform with the seven principles of public life identified by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (previously the Nolan Committee, now the Neill Committee), a copy of which is attached.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Revised Budget Allocation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the additional funding secured for the Health Service, how does this compare to the overall funding provided for the Health Service in GB and what steps is she taking to secure funding which equates to the level of funding provided per capita in GB.

(AQW 1048/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): The Revised Budget allocation for 2002-03 represents an 8.9% increase in my Department's spending power. I estimate that, in contrast, England's equivalent expenditure will increase by approximately 10.5% next year.

Since almost all the HPSS cost drivers originate in England, and since our health needs are actually greater than theirs, it is important that increases in my budget should at least keep pace with those in England. Where that does not happen, it is inevitable that we shall have less service development and that our service-users will suffer by comparison.

Per capita figures alone do not take account of our poor health status and various other factors, which mean that our need for HPSS expenditure is much higher than the GB average. My aim in the coming Spending Review will be to secure an increased level of funding which will provide our population with a modern, accessible and effective service.

Is méadú 8.9% i gcumhacht caiteachais mo Roinne an Buiséad Athbhreithnithe do 2002-03. Measaim, i gcodarsnacht leis, go méadóidh chaiteachas coibhéiseach Shasana le 10.5% go garbh ar an bhliain seo chugainn.

De thairbhe go n-eascraíonn tiománaithe costais na RSSS ó Shasana agus de thairbhe gur mó ár riachtanais shláinte, déanta na firinne, ná a chomhionann i Sasana, is tábhachtach gur cóir go mbeidh méaduithe sa bhuiséad s'agam ar comhchéim ar a laghad leo siúd i Sasana. Nuair nach dtarlaíonn a leithéid is cinnte gur lú an fhorbairt seirbhíse a bheidh againn agus go mbeidh ár n-úsáideoirí seirbhísí féin thíos nuair a chuirtear an dá sheirbhís sa mheá.

Ní chuireann na figiúirí per capita amháin san áireamh an stádas íseal sláinte s'againn agus fachtóirí éagsúla eile, a chiallaíonn gur mó i bhfad ár riachtanais féin ar chaiteachas na RSSS ná an meán sa BM. Is é an aidhm atá agam san Athbhreithniú Caiteachais atá le teacht leibhéal méadaithe maoinithe a chinntiú a thabharfadh seirbhís nua-aimseartha, ionrochtana agus éifeachtach dár muintir.

New Drug

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if she is aware of a new drug developed by Doctor Shamir Lebovitz in Israel which may prevent premature birth; and (b) any steps she will be taking to make the drug available.

(AQW 1543/01)

Ms de Brún: On the limited information available, I am unable to comment at present. New drug treatments are subject to rigorous examination before they are approved for use and I will await further information before making any comment.

Mar gheall ar an eolas teoranta atá ar fáil, ní féidir liom trácht air faoi láthair. Tá cóireáil nua le drugaí faoi réir scrúdaithe dhéin sula dtugtar cead chun iad a úsáid agus fanfaidh mé ar thuilleadh eolais sula ndéanfaidh mé trácht.

Smoking-Related Illnesses: Costs

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the annual cost to the Health Service of smoking-related illnesses.

(AQW 1548/01)

Ms de Brún: The total estimated annual inpatient costs to the health service of smoking related diseases is in excess of £22m. In addition, there are further costs associated with outpatient and primary care which cannot readily be identified.

Is é breis agus £22m na costais iomlána bhliantúla mheasta déanta ag an tseirbhís sláinte le hothair chónaitheacha ar thóg siad galair bainteach le caitheamh tobac. Chomh maith leis sin, tá costais bhreise ann bainteach le cúram éisothair agus príomhchúram nach féidir a mheas go réidh.

Adoption

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the number of couples currently on the adoption waiting list; and (b) the average age of parents who adopt. (AQW 1551/01)

Ms de Brún: 98 approved couples are currently waiting to be matched with a child. The average age of adoptive parents when they are approved as suitable to adopt is 38.

Tá 98 lánúin cheadaithe ag fanacht faoi láthair le bheith curtha le páiste. Is é 38 bliain meánaois na dtuismitheoirí mar dhaoine oiriúnach le haghaidh uchtaithe.

Antimicrobial Resistance Action Plan 2002-2005

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to combat the problems associated with the increasing resistance of bacteria to antibiotics. (AQW 1552/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department's *Antimicrobial Resistance Action Plan 2002-2005* was launched on 30 January 2002. It contains recommendations for action by Boards, Trusts and other agencies, both statutory and voluntary to address the problem of antibiotic resistance, and, in particular, its hard-to-treat infection aspect.

I am setting up a multi-disciplinary steering group under the auspices of the Department's Regional Advisory Committee on Communicable Disease Control to oversee the report's implementation.

Lainseáil *Plean Gníomhaíochta ar Fhrithbheart Frithmhicróbach 2002 – 2005* de chuid mo Roinne ar 30 Eanáir 2002. Istigh ann tá moltaí le haghaidh gnímh ag Boird, Iontaobhais agus gníomhaíochtaí eile, idir reachtúil agus dheonach le dul i ngleic leis fadhb an fhrithbhirt fhrithmhicróbach, agus, go háirithe, an gné ar doiligh cóir leighis a dhéanamh ar an ionfhabhtú.

Tá mé ag bunadh grúpa stiúrtha ildisciplíneach faoi phátrúnacht na Comhairle Réigiúnaí Chomhairlí de

chuid na Roinne ar Smachtú Galair Tógálaigh le maoirseacht a dhéanamh ar chur i bhfeidhm na tuairisce.

Adolescent Psychiatric Beds

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many adolescent psychiatric places are available in each Health Board Trust area. (AQW 1586/01)

Ms de Brún: South & East Belfast Trust currently provide six regional adolescent psychiatric beds. A further 10 beds will be provided by the Trust.

Cuireann Iontaobhas Bhéal Feirste Theas & Thoir sé leaba síciatracha réigiúnacha ar fáil d'ógánaigh i láthair na huair. Cuirfidh an tIontaobhas 10 leaba breise ar fáil.

Health and Social Services Estates Agency: Review

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans for a review of the Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Estates Agency. (AQW 1590/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department will shortly start a review of the Agency. The review group, whose membership includes both customers of the Agency and staff representatives, will be supported by consultants. The first stage of the review will be a period of consultation (3 months) followed by an evaluation of the organisational options for carrying out the Agency's functions in the future (3 months). If stage 2 confirms that the Agency's functions are still required and that the Agency remains the best vehicle for delivering those services, then the third and final stage will be a forward looking examination as to how to develop and improve its performance and the operation of its relationship with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It is planned that the review will be completed by the end of 2002.

Tosóidh an Roinn s'agam athbhreithniú Gníomhaireachta gan mhoill. Tabharfaidh comhairligh tacaíocht don ghrúpa athbhreithnithe, a mbeidh custaiméirí na Gníomhaireachta agus iondaithe foirne araon ina mball air. Beidh tréimhse comhairlithe (3 mí), sa chéad chéim den athbhreithniú agus beidh meastóireacht ina dhiaidh sin ar roghanna eagraíochtúla chun feidhmeanna na Gníomhaireachta a chomhlíonadh sa toadhchaí (3 mí). Má chinntíonn céim 2 go bhfuil feidhmeanna na Gníomhaireachta de dhíth go fóill agus gurb í an Ghníomhaireacht an fheithicil is fearr leis na seirbhísí sin a sholáthar, ansin amharcaidh an tríú céim, an chéim dheireanach, chun tosaigh ag scrúdú an dóigh lena feidhmiú agus le hoibríocht a caidrimh leis an

Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí a fheabhsú. Tá sé beartaithe go mbeidh deireadh leis an athbhreithniú faoi dheireadh 2002.

Paramilitary Punishment Beatings

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 745/99, AQO 41/00 and AQO 112/99, why the costs incurred by the Health Service of treating victims of paramilitary punishment beatings are not kept. (AQW 1594/01)

Ms de Brún: Treatment is provided to people with injuries, irrespective of how those injuries were inflicted. Current systems within hospitals cannot readily identify the information sought and to establish a dedicated system for the purpose would involve disproportionate cost to the service.

Tugtar cóireáil do dhaoine ar bhain gortuithe dóibh, beag beann ar an dóigh a ndéanadh na gortuithe sin orthu. Ní thig leis na córais reatha laistigh d'otharlanna an t-eolas iarrtha a fháil go réidh agus dá mbunófaí córas tiomnaithe don chuspóir seo, bheadh an costas i gceist ar an tseirbhís leis seo a dhéanamh díreireach.

MMR Vaccinations

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many MMR vaccines were administered in each Health Board area in each of the last 7 years. (AQW 1603/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on the number of primary courses of MMR vaccination completed in each Board is detailed in the table below.

	EHSSB	NHSSB	SHSSB	WHSSB	Total
1994/95	10,041	5,672	4,813	4,749	25,275
1995/96	8,373	5,533	4,661	4,136	22,703
1996/97	8,555	5,446	4,504	4,302	22,807
1997/98	8,233	5,439	4,439	4,339	22,450
1998/99	8,889	5,686	4,678	4,335	23,588
1999/00	9,265	5,741	4,748	4,418	24,172
2000/01	7,899	5,151	4,374	3,774	21,198

Tá eolas ar líon príomhchúrsaí vacsaínithe MMR déanta i ngach Bord léirithe sa tábla thíos.

	BSSSO	BSSST	BSSSD	BSSSI	Iomlán
1994/95	10,041	5,672	4,813	4,749	25,275
1995/96	8,373	5,533	4,661	4,136	22,703
1996/97	8,555	5,446	4,504	4,302	22,807
1997/98	8,233	5,439	4,439	4,339	22,450
1998/99	8,889	5,686	4,678	4,335	23,588

	BSSSO	BSSST	BSSSD	BSSSI	Iomlán
1999/00	9,265	5,741	4,748	4,418	24,172
2000/01	7,899	5,151	4,374	3,774	21,198

W&G Baird: Printing Costs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for her Department and associated agencies, (a) the total amount of money paid to W & G Baird for printing over the last 5 years; (b) if the work was tendered and awarded to the lowest tender; and (c) if there was any variation from the price quoted to the actual cost paid. (AQW 1617/01)

Ms de Brún: Since the establishment of the Executive, my Department has not awarded any contracts directly to W & G Baird.

Ó bhunú an Fheidhmeannais, níor thug an Roinn s'agamsa conradh ar bith go díreach do W & G Baird.

Dental Statistics

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the average number of decayed, missing or filled teeth per 5 year old for each Health Trust; and (b) the average figure for the United Kingdom. (AQW 1624/01)

Ms de Brún:

(a) information is detailed in the table below. These figures should be interpreted with caution, as there is currently no regional standardisation of screening. As parental consent is not always granted, figures may be affected by the percentage of children it is not possible to screen.

DECAYED, MISSING AND FILLED TEETH AMONG 5 YEAR OLDS IN COMMUNITY HEALTH TRUSTS, 1999/00

Trust	Average number of teeth with active decay	Average number of teeth missing	Average number of teeth filled
North & West Belfast	2.40	0.90	0.40
Ulster Community & Hospitals	0.86	0.27	0.26
South & East Belfast	0.90	0.30	0.30
Down Lisburn	0.94	0.57	0.27
Causeway	1.32	0.68	0.47
Homefirst	1.06	0.73	0.33
Newry & Mourne	1.38	0.72	0.41
Craigavon & Banbridge	1.08	0.47	0.35

Trust	Average number of teeth with active decay	Average number of teeth missing	Average number of teeth filled
Armagh & Dungannon	1.39	0.48	0.39
Foyle	1.80	0.80	0.10
Sperrin Lakeland	1.23	0.55	0.2

(b) average number of decayed, missing or filled teeth in 5 year olds in Great Britain and here in 1997/8 was 1.68.

(a) Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos. Ba chóir na figiúirí a léirmhíniú go faichilleach, mar faoi láthair níl caighdeán reigiúnach scagthástála ann. Toisc nach dtugtar cead ó thuismitheoirí i gcónaí, is dócha go mbeadh tionchar ag céatadán na bpáistí nach féidir iad a scagadh ar na figiúirí.

FIACLA LOFA AR IARRAIDH AGUS LÍONTA I MEASC PÁISTÍ CÚIG BLIANA D'AOIS IN IONTAOBHAI SHLÁINTE PHOBAIL, 1999/00

Iontaobhas	Meán-uimhir fiacila le lobhadh gníomhach	Meán-uimhir fiacila ar iarraidh	Meán-uimhir fiacila líonta
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	2.40	0.90	0.40
Otharlanna Pobail Uladh	0.86	0.27	0.26
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	0.90	0.30	0.30
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	0.94	0.57	0.27
An Clochán	1.32	0.68	0.47
Homefirst	1.06	0.73	0.33
An tIúr & Mhúm	1.38	0.72	0.41
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	1.08	0.47	0.35
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	1.39	0.48	0.39
An Feabhal	1.80	0.80	0.10
Tír Lochanna Speirín	1.23	0.55	0.2

(b) Ba é 1.68 an mheán-uimhir fiacila lofa, ar iarraidh nó líonta ag páistí sa Bhreatain Mhór agus anseo i 1997/8 .

**Judicial Review Costs:
Jubilee Maternity Hospital**

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the full costs of

the second judicial review on the Jubilee Maternity Hospital. (AQW 1626/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department incurred costs of £75,948.27 in regard to the second judicial review on the Jubilee Maternity Hospital. These are outlined below.

DHSSPS LEGAL FEES

Crown Solicitors Office	£10,038.00
Senior Counsel's Fees	£10,575.00
Junior Counsel's Fees	£10,398.75
Total	£31,011.75
Applicant's Legal Fees	
Professional Fees	£22,325.00
Senior Counsel's Fees	£12,220.00
Junior Counsel's Fees	£9,972.00
Outlay	£429.52
Total	£44,936.52
Grand Total	£75,948.27

Bhí costais £75,948.27 ar an Roinn s'agam maidir leis an dara hathreithniú breithiúnach ar Otharlann Mháithreachais na Iubhaile. Tá siad siúd léirithe thíos.

TÁILLÍ DLÍTHIÚLA NA RSSSP

Oifig Aturnae na Corónach	£10,038.00
Táillí na Comhairle Sinsearaí	£10,575.00
Táillí na Comhairle Sóisearaí	£10,398.75
Iomlán	£31,011.75
Táillí Dlíthiúla an Iarrthóra	
Táillí Gairmiúla	£22,325.00
Táillí na Comhairle Sinsearaí	£12,220.00
Táillí na Comhairle Sóisearaí	£9,972.00
Eisíoc	£429.52
Iomlán	£44,936.52
Iomlán	£75,948.27

Independent Review Panel

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the procedures in place to implement the recommendations of Independent Review Panels for patients' complaints on GPs. (AQW 1627/01)

Ms de Brún: Under their *Terms of Services (General Medical Services Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997)* GPs are required to comply with the HPSS Complaints Procedures. These procedures, however, do not make it mandatory for GPs to implement the recommendations of an Independent Review Panel. This has been recognised as a basic weakness in the Complaints Procedures and has also been highlighted in a recent evaluation of NHS

Complaints Procedures which covered complaints procedures in England, Scotland, Wales and here.

Most GPs here willingly take on the implementation of the Independent Review Panel's recommendations but there have been a few isolated incidents where this has not been the case. HPSS Complaints Procedures are currently being reviewed and this issue will be looked at as part of that review.

De réir a *Terms of Services (General Medical Services Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997)* ní mór do Ghnáthdhochtúirí déanamh de réir Ghnáthaimh Ghearán na SSSP. Ní chuireann na gnáthaimh seo iachall ar Ghnáthdhochtúirí áfach moltaí an Phainéil Athbhreithnithe Neamhspleách a chur i bhfeidhm. Aithníodh é seo mar bhunlaige sna Gnáthaimh Ghearán agus aibhsíodh é seo fosta i measúnú déanach ar Ghnáthaimh Ghearán na SNS a clúdaigh gnáthaimh ghearán i Sasana, in Albain, sa Bhreatain Bheag agus abhus anseo.

Tá formhór na nGhnáthdhochtúirí anseo toilteanach moltaí an Phainéil Athbhreithnithe Neamhspleách a chur i bhfeidhm ach tharla sé cúpla uair nuair nárbh amhlaidh a bhí an scéal. Tá athbhreithniú á dhéanamh ar Ghnáthaimh Ghearán na SSSP i láthair na huair agus smaoinofar ar an cheist seo mar chuid den athbhreithniú sin.

Strategic Review of the NI Ambulance Service

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the date 'Mapping the Road to Change - A Strategic Review of the NI Ambulance Service' was published; and (b) any progress being made on its implementation. (AQW 1629/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW1623/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 1623/01.

Complaints

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the high level of complaints against Trusts within the Health Service revealed in the Northern Ireland Ombudsman's 'Facing the Future' document (page 6). (AQW 1645/01)

Ms de Brún: My objective is to ensure that service users are happy with the quality of services they receive from Trusts. Where this is not the case, I want to ensure that the complaints procedures are accessible and are easy to both understand and use, with the aim of achieving a satisfactory resolution as speedily as possible.

The fact is that the underfunding of the health and social services and the continued and substantial rise in demand for services have combined to leave an increased number of people unhappy with the services. This is reflected in a rise in the number of complaints. I am working to improve the services and will continue to seek the additional funds needed to make this happen.

I am also determined to ensure that quality is reflected throughout the HPSS and that any shortcomings which are identified through the complaints procedure or the work of the Ombudsman are properly addressed.

Is é mo chuspóir le cinntiú go bhfuil úsáideoirí seirbhísí sásta le caighdeán na seirbhísí a fhaigheann siad ó na hIontaobhais. Nuair nach bhfuil seo amhlaidh, is mian liom cinntiú gur féidir teacht ar na gnáthaimh ghearán agus go bhfuil siad furasta a thuiscint agus a úsáid agus an aidhm agam réiteach sásúil a bhaint amach a ghaiste agus is féidir.

Déanta na fírinne, is iad fomhaoiniú na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta agus an méadú leanúnach mór sa ráchairt ar na seirbhísí araon is cúis leis an mhéadú i líon na ndaoine míshásta leis na seirbhísí. Léirítear seo sa mhéadú i líon na ngearán déanta. Tá mé ag obair chun na seirbhísí a fheabhsú agus leanfaidh mé ar aghaidh le hiarraidh ar an airgead breise a bheidh de dhíth leis seo a bhaint amach.

Tá mé meáite fosta a chinntiú go léirítear feabhas ar fud na SSSP agus go dtugtar faoi locht ar bith aitheanta ag na gnáthaimh ghearán nó mar gheall ar obair Chosantóir an Phobail mar is ceart.

Knee Replacement Operations

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the waiting times for knee replacement operations in (a) each Health Board area; and (b) for each year since 1995. (AQW 1648/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in Table 1 below. Knee replacement operations are carried out in two Boards only.

TABLE 1. AVERAGE COMPLETED WAITS (IN DAYS) FOR KNEE REPLACEMENT OPERATIONS CARRIED OUT IN EACH BOARD, 1994/5 – 2000/01

	Knee operations carried out in EHSSB	Knee operations carried out in WHSSB	All knee operations
1994/95	240	184	236
1995/96	183	154	181
1996/97	231	119	220
1997/98	279	234	275
1998/99	264	197	257
1999/00	231	247	232
2000/01	226	222	226

Tá an t-eolas léirithe i dTábla 1 thíos. Ní dhéatar obráidí malartaithe glúine ach amháin i ndá Bhord.

TÁBLA 1. MEÁNAM FEITHIMH CRÍOCHNAITHE (I LAETHANTA) D'OBRAÍDÍ A RINNEADH AG GACH BORD, 1994/5 – 2000/01

	Obráidí déanta ag BSSSO	Obráidí déanta ag BSSI	Gach Obráid glúine
1994/95	240	184	236
1995/96	183	154	181
1996/97	231	119	220
1997/98	279	234	275
1998/99	264	197	257
1999/00	231	247	232
2000/01	226	222	226

Home-Start Schemes

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 757/01, to detail the Home-Starts Schemes that are being funded by HSS Trusts in the current financial year, and to account for the variance in funding across HSS Trusts in the 2000-01 financial year. (AQW 1662/01)

Ms de Brún: Details of the Home-Start schemes that are being funded by Health and Social Services Trusts in the current financial year are provided in the table overleaf:

The level of funding provided for Home-Start schemes is a matter for individual Trusts to determine and agree with the Home-Start schemes operating within their respective areas.

Home-Start scheme	HSS Trust
Antrim District	Homefirst
Carrickfergus	Homefirst
Causeway	Causeway
Colin/Lisburn (Belfast) Colin/Lisburn (Lisburn)	Down/Lisburn
Down District Ballynahinch (satellite) Newcastle (satellite)	Down/Lisburn
East Belfast	South & East Belfast
North Belfast	North & West Belfast
North Down & Ards	Ulster & Community Hospitals
Armagh & Dungannon Armagh outreach (satellite)	Armagh & Dungannon
Craigavon	Craigavon & Banbridge
Newry & Mourne	Newry & Mourne
West Tyrone	Sperrin Lakeland

Tá sonraí ar na scéimeanna Home-Start a mhaoiníonn na hIontaobhais Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta sa bhliain airgeadais seo léirithe sa tábla ar an taobh eile:

Baineann an leibhéal maoinithe curtha ar fáil do scéimeanna Home-Start leis na hIontaobhais aonair chun scéimeanna Home-Start, ag oibriú laistigh dá gceantair féin, a chinntiú agus a aontú.

Scéim Home-Start	Iontaobhas SSS
Ceantar Aontroma	Homefirst
Carraig Fhearghais	Homefirst
Clochán	Clochán
Collann/Lios na gCearrbhach (Béal Feirste) Collann/Lios na gCearrbhach (Lios na gCearrbhach)	An Dún/ Lios na gCearrbhach
Ceantar an Dúin Baile na hInse (satailít) An Caisleán Nua (satailít)	An Dún/ Lios na gCearrbhach
Béal Feirste Thoir	Béal Feirste Theas agus Thoir
Béal Feirste Thuaidh	Béal Feirste Thuaidh agus Thiar
An Dún Thuaidh & Na hArda	Otharlanna Uladh agus Pobail
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn Ard Mhacha – ionad for-rochtana (satailít)	Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn
Craigavon	Craigavon & Droichead na Banna
An tÍur agus Múrn	An tÍur agus Múrn
Tír Eoghain Thiar	Tír Lochanna Speirín

Code of Conduct

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the standards expected for individuals appointed to quangos for which she is responsible. (AQW 1669/01)

Ms de Brún: Following appointment to Health & Personal Social Services (HPSS) bodies and other executive Non Departmental Public Bodies (NDPB) for which I am responsible, all board members are expected to subscribe to the highest standards of propriety as set out in the body's 'Code of Conduct' or 'Code of Best Practice', and the HPSS 'Codes of Conduct and Codes of Accountability'.

I have arranged for copies of the HPSS 'Codes of Conduct and Accountability', and other 'Codes of Conduct' and 'Codes of Practice' relating to executive NDPBs to be placed in the Assembly Library.

I ndiaidh na gceapachán d'fhorais na Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Pearsanta (SSSP) agus d'Fhorais Phoiblí Neamh-Rannacha fheidhmeannacha eile (FPNF) as a bhfuil mé freagrach, iarrtar ar bhaili uile an bhoird cloí leis na caighdeáin is airde de chuibheas mar atá leagtha amach in 'Cód Iompair' nó 'Cód Dea-chleachtais' an fhorais agus in 'Cóid Iompair agus Cóid Fhreagrachta' na SSSP.

Shocraigh mé go gcuirfí cóipeanna de 'Cóid Iompair agus Fhreagrachta' na SSSP chomh maith le 'Cóid Iompair' agus 'Cóid Chleachtais' eile a bhaineann le FPNFanna feidhmeannacha i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

Meningitis C Vaccine

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of adverse drug reactions to the Meningitis C vaccine which have been reported; and (b) the number of these which were fatal. (AQW 1702/01)

Ms de Brún: The Medicines Control Agency has received a total of 252 reports originating from clinicians here, of adverse drug reactions in association with the Meningitis C vaccine. None of these was fatal.

Fuair an Ghníomhaireacht Rialaithe Cógas 252 tuairisc san iomlán ó chliniceoirí anseo ar fhrithghníomhartha díobhálacha drugaí maidir leis an vaicsín Meiningíteas C. Ní raibh ceann ar bith acu seo marfach.

Meningitis C: Laboratory Confirmed Cases

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many laboratory confirmed cases of Meningitis C have been reported for each year since 1998. (AQW 1703/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

LABORATORY CONFIRMED CASES OF MENINGITIS C REPORTED TO THE COMMUNICABLE DISEASES SURVEILLANCE CENTRE

1998	15
1999	40
2000	36
2001	8

Tá an t-eolas léirithe sa tábla thíos.

CÁSANNA MEININGÍTEAS C A CINNTÍODH SA TSAOTHARLANN A TUAIRISCÍODH DON IONAD FAIRE GALAR TEAGMHÁLACH

1998	15
1999	40
2000	36
2001	8

Pneumococcal Meningitis

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what percentage of children

have been diagnosed with pneumococcal meningitis by 5 years of age. (AQW 1704/01)

Ms de Brún: In 2001, one child aged under 5 years of age was diagnosed with pneumococcal meningitis here. This represents 0.0007% of the local population aged 5 years and under.

Sa bhliain 2001, bhí páiste amháin faoi 5 bliain d'aois a diagnóisíodh le meiningíteas neomacocúil anseo. Tá sin mar 0.0007% den phobal áitiúil a bhfuil 5 bliain nó níos lú slánaithe acu.

Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust: Residential Homes

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will make a statement in relation to the discharge of patients from hospital into residential care in West Tyrone. (AQW 1731/01)

Ms de Brún: I am advised that the Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust, which covers West Tyrone, has experienced few problems placing clients in residential homes following their discharge from hospital. At present there are 3 patients in Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital who are experiencing some delay in discharge but this is because they need a specialised assessment and a particular type of placement.

The Trust is confident that, unless there is an unexpected surge in demand, it can respond to the demand for placements in residential care.

Tugadh comhairle dom gur beag fadhb a bhí ag Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Thír Lochanna Speirín, a chlúdaíonn Tír Eoghain Thiar, le cliaint a shocrú i dtithe cónaithe i ndiaidh dóibh bheith scaoilte amach as an otharlann. Faoi láthair tá 3 othar in Otharlann Thír Eoghain agus Fhear Manach a raibh moill éigin leis an scaoileadh amach as siocair go bhfuil sainmheasúnú agus socrú áirithe de dhíth orthu.

Tá an tIontaobhas muiníneach gur féidir leis freastal ar an éileamh ar shocrúcháin i gcúram cónaithe mura bhfuil borradh mór faoin éileamh nach bhfuiltear ag dúil leis.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Assessing Speed Limits

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what criteria are used to (a) assess whether a speed limit should be 40, 30 or 20 miles per hour and (b) consider any requests or representation for reduction in speed limits. (AQW 1457/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): The criteria used by my Department's Roads Service when assessing or considering requests for reduction in speed limits are essentially the same as those that apply in other parts of the United Kingdom. They take into consideration the character of the road, the density of adjacent development, accident rates and the prevailing speed of traffic.

In general terms:

- 20 mph speed limits are only appropriate where they are combined with robust self-enforcing traffic calming measures that naturally restrict the speeds to 20 mph.
- 30 mph is the nationally recognised limit for urban areas. It is typically applied in built up areas with in-depth development on both sides of the road.
- 40 mph is applied to less densely developed suburban roads.
- Accident records and speed of traffic are taken into consideration when it is not possible to make a clear classification from the above criteria or when they indicate that a speed limit should be changed.
- On dual and single carriageway roads with a national speed limit of 70 mph and 60 mph respectively, a reduction in limit should only be considered when an identified accident problem exists.

Vehicle Occupancy

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development, further to AQW 2353/00, what progress has been made in carrying out research to establish what proportion of peak time traffic consists of vehicles occupied only by the driver. (AQW 1473/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department has investigated vehicle occupancy on one of the main arterial routes into Belfast. Officials found that 75% of vehicles were occupied only by drivers. Further research is ongoing to identify what factors encourage people to car-share.

Strategic Rail Authority's 10-Year Strategy

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister for Regional Development what additional funding will be made available for improvement of our rail services, in light of the decision to allocate £56.5 million to upgrade the rail network nationally. (AQW 1477/01)

EXPENDITURE ON ROADS

Type of Works	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/95	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01
Capital Works £000's	914	1,528	633	454	509	323	303	509	556	276
Maintenance £000's	1710	1666	1810	2558	2543	2527	2215	2628	2495	2005

Mr P Robinson: The Strategic Rail Authority's 10-year strategy for the development of rail travel in Great Britain envisages a commitment of some £33.5 billion by Government over the next 10 years. However, as responsibility for rail travel in Northern Ireland has been devolved to the Assembly, the Strategic Rail Authority's strategy will have no direct implications for railways in Northern Ireland. Funding decisions for railways here are a matter for the Assembly and I will be seeking additional investment for railways in the coming year in accordance with our Regional Transportation Strategy, currently being developed.

A8 (M), Corr's Corner/ Sandyknowes: Improvement

Mr Clyde asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the extent of current improvement works at Corr's Corner to Sandyknowes (A8 M); (b) the estimated cost of the works; and (c) the timeframe for completion of the works. (AQW 1500/01)

Mr P Robinson: The current improvement works on the A8 (M) between Corr's Corner and Sandyknowes involves the replacement of the existing earth mound barrier in the central reserve with corrugated beam safety fencing and the surfacing of the central reserve with asphalt. The work, costing approximately £100,000, was completed on 27 January 2002.

Expenditure on Roads: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the level of expenditure on roads in North Down over the last 10 years. (AQW 1507/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain details of expenditure on road improvements on a parliamentary constituency basis. However, the table below shows the expenditure incurred by Roads Service on capital (i.e. major and minor road improvement schemes) and maintenance activities in the North Down Borough Council area during the ten year period 1991/92 to 2000/01.

Because of changes arising from the reorganisation of Roads Service in 1999/2000, the maintenance figures for the years 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 are as yet provisional. However, firm figures will be available by the end of March 2002 and I will provide them to you at that time with the relevant details, which I will copy in the Assembly Library.

Road User's Charter Statement

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development, with regard to Roads Service Annual Report & Accounts 1999-2000, to make a statement on the failure of Roads Service to achieve consistently the key standards set out in the Road User's Charter Statement.

(AQW 1520/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Roads Service Annual Report and Accounts 1999-2000 recorded details of Roads Service performance in endeavouring to achieve 9 key and 22 other service standards as contained in the Road User's Charter Statement. Only three of these challenging targets were not met.

The year 1999-2000 was one of considerable change for Roads Service. Not only had the Agency to face the challenges of a major internal reorganisation, it also experienced computer software problems and a significant increase in workload as a consequence of Devolution. All of this was against a background of continuing pressures on staff resources.

Although Roads Service was not fully satisfied with the outturns it achieved in 1999-2000, it believes that the overall level of service provided to customers was satisfactory. The Service is seeking to continually improve its performance.

Roads Service Annual Report and Accounts 1999-2000

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development, with regard to Roads Service Annual Report & Accounts 1999-2000, to detail his plans to remedy underachievement by Roads Service of acknowledgement and response to formal complaints. (AQW 1521/01)

Mr P Robinson: In response to the underachievement during 1999 of acknowledgement and response to formal complaints, my Department's Roads Service reviewed the manual system for recording mail and introduced in Autumn 1999, an electronic mail tracking system on a pilot basis. Following the successful pilot study, this electronic system was upgraded and implemented throughout the Agency in 2001. The system alerts staff of impending deadlines and more accurately monitors performance against the key targets.

In addition, the system has facilitated monitoring of the Agency's performance on acknowledgement and response to complaints and enquiries on a monthly basis. This provides early warning of under-achievement and enables management to identify and remedy any local problems.

Roads Service Annual Report and Accounts

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development, with regard to Roads Service Annual Report &

Accounts 1999-2000, to detail his plans to remedy underachievement by Roads Service of repair of defects of over 50mm deep against Ministerial targets set.

(AQW 1522/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, arising from the reorganisation of Roads Service on 1 April 1999, some operational difficulties associated with the computer software used for ordering and monitoring defect repairs were experienced. As noted in the Roads Service Annual Report and Accounts 1999-2000, these difficulties affected the accuracy of the Agency's performance information over a period of approximately 6 months and cast serious doubts on the reliability of the overall performance statistics for the reporting period.

Following the adoption of new road maintenance standards in June 2000, revised performance indicators were set for the repair of defects. These revised targets reduced the response time in respect of defects over 50 mm deep from 3 working days to 1 day, with 90% to be repaired within one day of detection. For the period 1 April 2001 to 31 December 2001, 85% of these defects were repaired within 1 day. Roads Service is currently reviewing the performance of contractors delivering this repair service with a view to improving their performance.

Reservoirs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) the short-term measures he is taking to address the drought problems that are now occurring; and (b) if he has a long-term strategy for the provision of new reservoirs. (AQW 1545/01)

Mr P Robinson: Impounding reservoirs in the North and West of the Province are almost full and there are no concerns about the water supply in these areas. However, the unusually dry autumn and mild winter has meant that the Silent Valley reservoirs are much lower than normal for this time of year. The heavy rainfall over the past couple of weeks has improved the situation. There is no immediate threat to water supplies in County Down and Belfast. However, average, or preferably above average, rainfall is required over coming months to prevent difficulties later in the year.

Water Service has implemented a range of measures to reduce demand on the Silent Valley reservoirs. These include increasing water supplies from other sources, abstraction from additional boreholes and other temporary sources, pressure reduction programmes, and enhanced leakage detection and repair. Customers are also being encouraged to use less water. A leaflet promoting water saving techniques is to be delivered to all customers in late February.

Water Service is currently carrying out a major review of its water resources strategy for the period up

to 2030. The review is nearing completion and takes account of a range of key factors including growth in population and usage, climate change and the potential for leakage reduction and demand management. I would expect that the draft strategy will be published for consultation later this year.

Salt Bins

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if a private housing development contractor has a responsibility to provide grit boxes before Roads Service adoption is completed. (AQW 1546/01)

Mr P Robinson: There is no requirement for private housing developers/contractors to provide salt bins within their developments to enable the roads to be adopted by my Department. However, subject to certain criteria being met, Roads Service will provide salt bins on roads in residential areas which have been adopted into the public road network but are not included in its salting schedule.

Adoption of Roads: New Housing Developments

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the timescale for adoption of roads in a completed new housing development. (AQW 1547/01)

Mr P Robinson: In the case of private streets that have been determined through the planning process, it is the responsibility of developers to bring roads and sewers up to the required standards for adoption by my Department. Where such roads and sewers are provided to the required standards, they are adopted promptly.

Where satisfactory completion of roads and sewers is not effected within a reasonable period from the date of occupation of houses, my Department has enforcement powers under the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980, as amended, to enable it to complete the necessary work at the developer's expense. Such action is normally only initiated after efforts to persuade developers to meet their obligations have proved unsuccessful, with each case being carefully considered on its merits.

Roads Service will, however, normally seek to pursue developers on the issue of adoption where 80% of the houses have been occupied for one year or where adoption has not taken place within two years of the street works being substantially complete.

Central Claims Unit

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the procedure taken by Roads Service when

processing a claim for vehicle damage due to road potholes. (AQW 1553/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Central Claims Unit of the Department deals with all public liability claims including vehicle damage claims related to potholes in the road.

The initial procedures upon receipt of the claim are for it to be registered, an acknowledgement sent to the claimant and a report from Roads Service is requested. Also, for higher value claims, an independent vehicle assessor is engaged.

The Roads Service report would include information about the timing of all inspections and repairs of the stretch of road in question. This is central to the ultimate decision because compensation in such circumstances is not guaranteed and is only offered where the Department appears to have been negligent.

Exceptionally, for very low value claims which meet certain criteria, there is a fast track procedure which enables them to be dealt with much quicker than other claims.

With the Roads Service report and, if appropriate, the vehicle assessor's report, a decision is made either to offer compensation, turn the claim down, refer it to a third party or obtain further information. After obtaining further information, the decision options are the same.

Structural Defects, Far Circular Road, Dungannon

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Regional Development, in respect of the Far Circular Road, Dungannon, to detail, in each of the last 5 years, (a) the number of structural defects affecting the road; (b) the number of accidents reported due to structural defects affecting the road; and (c) the number of claims lodged with the Department due to accidents caused by structural defects affecting the road. (AQW 1556/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, in the course of its routine maintenance inspection programme, the following numbers of structural defects were identified on the B517 Far Circular Road, Dungannon during the last 5 years:

Year	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
No. of defects	12	2	12	16	16

No claims have been lodged with my Department in the last 5 years due to accidents caused by structural defects on Far Circular Road, although there have been claims in respect of the adjacent Killyman Road. Detailed information about personal injury road claims is maintained by the police. Officials in both Roads Service and Central Claims Unit monitor available information to identify roads or locations with a pattern of accidents.

Upgrading Roads: Derry City Council Area

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of money spent on upgrading roads in the Derry City Council area in the past 3 years. (AQW 1568/01)

Mr P Robinson: The table below details the expenditure incurred by my Department's Roads Service on upgrading roads (ie capital expenditure on major and minor road improvement schemes) within the Derry City Council area in each of the last 3 years:

Financial Year	Capital expenditure on major road improvement schemes £'000s	Capital expenditure on minor road improvement schemes £'000s	Total £'000s
1998-1999	174	588	762
1999-2000	471	494	965
2000-2001	1,015	658	1,673

Employment at Central Station

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps have been taken by Translink to ensure that people living in the area adjacent to Central Station Belfast are able to avail of all/any job opportunities at the Station. (AQW 1588/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that job vacancies at Central Station are advertised in the Belfast Telegraph, are placed on Translink's web site and are forwarded to the Training and Employment Agency for display. Translink has also advised that it will shortly have a vacancies notice board erected in Central Station advertising vacancies throughout Translink to the general public. Translink has also recently participated in the Gasworks Employment Matching Service (GEM) Job Fair that took place in St George's Market.

Water Extraction: Camlough Lake

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans the Water Service have for increased water extraction from Camlough Lake, Co Armagh. (AQW 1589/01)

Mr P Robinson: Approximately 2.5 megalitres of water per day is abstracted from Camlough Lake as part of the public water supply for Newry Town and the surrounding area. Water Service is currently undertaking a major review of its water resources strategy for the period up to 2030. The review takes account of a range of factors including growth in population and usage, climate change and the potential for leakage reduction and demand management. The future need for water abstraction from Camlough Lake is being considered as part of the overall review.

The review is nearing completion and I expect that the draft strategy will be published for consultation later this year.

W&G Baird: Printing Costs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, for his Department and associated agencies, (a) the total amount of money paid to W & G Baird for printing over the last 5 years; (b) if the work was tendered and awarded to the lowest tender; and (c) if there was any variation from the price quoted to the actual cost paid. (AQW 1595/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department has made no payments to W & G Baird since devolution.

Rural Transport Fund

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Regional Development, in light of the difficulties in accessing transport in isolated rural areas, if he will consider implementing a rural/elderly transport fund. (AQW 1633/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department already administers a Rural Transport Fund, which has a prime objective of reducing social exclusion by providing transport opportunities for people with reduced mobility in rural areas. This involves spending £1.6m this year in subsidy for additional Ulsterbus services and in support of accessible transport services provided by local community transport partnerships in rural areas. Expenditure will rise to £1.7m in 2002/03 and to £1.8m in 2003/04.

Maintenance Costs: Roads, Water, Sewerage System

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to state his assessment of the total cost of necessary maintenance work, per constituency, on (a) the roads network; and (b) the water and sewerage system. (AQW 1642/01)

Mr P Robinson: As regards roads, the estimated total cost of adequately maintaining the country's road network is some £86M per annum whereas, at present, only about half that amount is available to my Department's Roads Service. In addition, there is a structural maintenance backlog amounting to some £120M. A breakdown of these figures is not available on a constituency basis.

The size of the capital road works programme for the next 10-year period, ie the 10-year Forward Planning Schedule, is currently being considered by my Department within the context of the Proposed Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) which has recently been

published for consultation. I hope to announce details of schemes which will be included in the Schedule later this year after the publication of the RTS.

Similarly, with regard to the water and sewerage system, the information is not available on a constituency basis. My Department's Water Service has information systems based on drinking water supply zones and wastewater collection areas, many of which straddle Assembly constituencies and district council areas.

Water Service is currently compiling its second asset management plan which is due for completion in late 2002. This plan will quantify the total capital cost requirement up to 2020. It will also define, as a part of the total capital cost, the capital maintenance requirement for all of the water and sewerage infrastructure. The plan is based on the condition of the existing infrastructure and the demands being placed on it. The total capital requirement is anticipated to be in excess of £3 billion, which represents an average requirement of more than £150M per annum. Current capital funding is in the order of £100M per annum.

Disruption to Road Users

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail progress on (i) the minimisation of disruption to road users; and (ii) reinstatement of carriageways to Road Service standards during and after utility installation. (AQW 1643/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Safety at Street Works and Road Works Code of Practice which became operative throughout the UK on 1 February 2002, gives guidance to utilities and their contractors on signing, guarding, lighting and maintaining their works. The introduction of the Code of Practice should help to minimise disruption to road users and failure to comply with the Code may lead to prosecution by my Department's Roads Service.

As regards the reinstatement of carriageways, I can assure you that Roads Service makes strenuous efforts to ensure that utilities and their contractors comply with the requirements of the Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and the Code of Practice on the Reinstatement of Openings in Roads. To this end, Roads Service has initiated enforcement action against those utilities who fail to reinstate street works to the specified standards. To date, one prosecution has been successful and a number of other prosecutions are pending.

Maintenance Costs: Roads, Water, Sewerage System

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to state his assessment of the total cost of necessary capital works, per constituency, on (a) roads; and (b) the water and sewerage system. (AQW 1644/01)

Mr P Robinson: As regards roads, the estimated total cost of adequately maintaining the country's road network is some £86M per annum whereas, at present, only about half that amount is available to my Department's Roads Service. In addition, there is a structural maintenance backlog amounting to some £120M. A breakdown of these figures is not available on a constituency basis.

The size of the capital road works programme for the next 10-year period, ie the 10-year Forward Planning Schedule, is currently being considered by my Department within the context of the proposed Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) which has recently been published for consultation. I hope to announce details of schemes which will be included in the Schedule later this year after the publication of the RTS.

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Water Service is currently compiling its second asset management plan which is due for completion in late 2002. This plan will quantify the total capital cost requirement up to 2020. It will also define, as a part of the total capital cost, the capital maintenance requirement for all of the water and sewerage infrastructure. The plan is based on the condition of the existing infrastructure and the demands being placed on it. The total capital requirement is anticipated to be in excess of £3 billion, which represents an average requirement of more than £150M per annum. Current capital funding is in the order of £100M per annum.

Appointees to Public Bodies

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the standards expected for individuals appointed to quangos for which he is responsible.

(AQW 1671/01)

Mr P Robinson: Appointees to public bodies for which I have responsibility are expected to be fully committed to the principles and values of public life and be prepared to perform their duties accordingly. The seven principles of conduct underpinning public life are selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

Bombardier/Shorts: Leasehold of Land at Belfast Harbour

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions he has had with Bombardier regarding the leasehold of land at Belfast Harbour.

(AQW 1766/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Vice President and General Manager of Bombardier/Shorts did raise this issue with me two years ago, prior to embarking on exploratory talks with Belfast Harbour Commissioners as the owners of the Harbour Estate. I have not had any further discussions with the company on this matter since that time.

Under the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding between BHC and the Department, the Harbour Commissioners are required to consult the Department prior to any disposal or change of use in harbour lands.

Salting Footways

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to reduce the number of pedestrian accidents on footpaths during snowy and icy conditions. (AQO 721/01)

Mr P Robinson: There is no statutory duty on my Department's Roads Service, or indeed on District Councils who have responsibilities for street cleaning, to salt footways. The whole issue of winter service, including treatment of footways, was reviewed last year and was subsequently fully debated by the Assembly in July 2001. At that time it was recognised that the cost of salting footways was prohibitive and that the basic logistics of introducing such a service, which is largely a manual task, make it impractical. However, my predecessor indicated that, in periods of prolonged lying snow, he would be seeking to enlist the help of other agencies, such as district councils to assist in clearing busy town centre footways.

It was in this context that my predecessor, Gregory Campbell, wrote to each council last autumn, outlining proposals for partnering arrangements for the removal of snow and ice from town centre footways and pedestrian areas. My Department's Roads Service followed up this initial contact by writing to each council explaining the proposals in detail and enclosing a proposed model agreement.

While some councils have indicated a willingness to participate in a partnering arrangement, others have indicated reservations and, as yet, I am disappointed to report that none have actually signed up to an agreement. Roads Service is arranging to meet with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association to discuss the proposals in more detail.

Regional Transportation Strategy

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of meetings he has conducted with Mr Noel Dempsey TD, Minister for the Environment and Local Government in the last 3 years, and to outline any plans to meet with him in the future to discuss

a single-island strategy for upgrading our roads infrastructure. (AQO 725/01)

Mr P Robinson: I have not met with Mr Dempsey during my period as Minister for Regional Development. I do not accept the need for a single all-Ireland roads strategy. Today I launched in the House the consultation on a draft Regional Transportation Strategy, to follow on from the Regional Development Strategy. I understand that the Republic of Ireland is at present completing its National Spatial Strategy and I can see merit in consultation and practical co-operation in the dovetailing of the outcome of these strategies particularly in relation to specific road projects and railways which cross the border. I am willing to meet Mr Dempsey in due course to consider these matters, which would be consistent with my policy of practical co-operation which does not require the political apparatus of formal north-south structures.

Traffic Congestion: Downpatrick

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to address traffic congestion in Downpatrick Town Centre; and to make a statement. (AQO 710/01)

Mr P Robinson: As the Member will be aware, my Department's Roads Service has plans to introduce a one-way system in Irish Street, St Patrick's Avenue and Market Street in Downpatrick to address the problem of traffic congestion in the town centre. Roads Service hopes to commence formal consultations on the proposed one-way system in March 2002.

Ducts

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has made any plans to place ducted cable, rentable by utilities, at the side of all new highways being constructed to save on roadwork costs in future. (AQO 755/01)

Mr P Robinson: Where feasible (and in line with current safety requirements), my Department's Road Service facilitates the installation of ducts in new works for future use by utilities and itself. All utilities are advised well in advance of proposed new works and are asked to indicate their future intentions. Any ducts that are installed are provided by the utilities and are not rented to them.

A8 Belfast to Larne Road: Upgrading

Mr R Hutchinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on progress on the upgrading of the A8 Belfast to Larne Road. (AQO 745/01)

Mr P Robinson: As I indicated in my answer to your Oral Assembly Question (AQO 54/01) on 10 September 2001, my Department's Roads Service intends to carry out a package of improvements costing some £12 million to the A8 Belfast to Larne road. The relevant Environmental and planning procedures for all of the proposed improvements have been completed and the current position on each of the 5 components is as follows:

- Doagh Road to Coleman's Corner dualling - the closing date for objections to the Notice of Intention to Make a Vesting Order was 21 January 2002. One objection has been lodged which Roads Service are attempting to resolve;
- link road and roundabout scheme at the A57 junction, Ballynure - the Notice of Intention to Make a Vesting Order is being prepared and should be published by Spring 2002;
- traffic calming measures at Ballynure - these will be implemented as part of the new link road and roundabout scheme at the A57 junction, Ballynure;
- 2 climbing lanes at Ballynure - the land for this work has been acquired by agreement and tenders for the scheme have been invited. Construction should commence early summer 2002; and
- new roundabouts at Millbrook and Antiville - the closing date for objections to the Notice of Intention to Make a Vesting Order was 21 January 2002. One objection has been lodged which Roads Service is attempting to resolve.

Wastewater Treatment Works: North Down/Ards Area

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the current position in regard to a decision on the site of a sewage works for the North Down area; and to make a statement. (AQO 753/01)

Mr P Robinson: I am aware of the concerns expressed by public representatives and members of the public about the siting of the wastewater treatment works for the North Down/Ards area. I am carefully considering all the issues with officials. I propose to announce my decision on the preferred site in a statement to the Assembly later this month.

Rural Proofing

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he has taken with regard to his obligations on rural proofing. (AQO 716/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department is very conscious of the needs of the extensive rural community in Northern Ireland and routinely considers the rural dimension as part of the making and implementation of policy.

Indeed an example of this is reflected in the proposed Regional Transportation Strategy where the concept of 'rural proofing' was applied and my officials liaised closely with officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in the preparation of the Strategy.

Criminal Damage: Costs

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail financial and other costs associated with (a) criminal damage to each form of public transport; (b) violence against personnel; (c) the repair or replacement costs, including labour and materials, to vehicles and property; (d) personal injury claims; and (e) any temporary replacement vehicles and other consequential losses, in each of the past 5 years.

(AQO 722/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that in the financial years 97/98, 98/99, 99/00, 00/01 and 01/02 to date, the costs of criminal damage to its bus fleet were £683,000, £660,000, £737,000, £872,000 and £743,000 respectively. Similar historical figures are not available for rail but Translink advise that in this current financial year costs of almost £250,000 have been incurred through criminal damage.

These costs represent only the direct cost of repairs, ie labour and materials. They do not include the loss of fare revenue that arises when vehicles have to be taken out of service without warning, the cost of personal injury claims from staff and the public which are inevitably settled retrospectively and other consequential losses which are difficult to quantify.

In respect of attacks against personnel there have been 88, 98, 78, 65 and 64 reported attacks on bus drivers in the calendar years 1997-2001.

As a general rule Translink do not incur direct costs for vehicles which temporarily replace those damaged through criminal acts. Instead spare buses which may be due for scheduled maintenance are utilised and maintenance deferred if necessary.

I deplore and condemn without reservation these wanton acts of vandalism on public transport vehicles. The money that Translink has used to repair the vehicles could obviously have been much better utilised in improving services. Furthermore, these acts of vandalism do nothing to encourage the general public to utilise public transport. I will therefore continue to support Translink in its ongoing efforts to try and eradicate such problems.

Car Park, Laurence Hill

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the Department's long-term

plans for the car park adjacent to the Foyle Arts building car park in Laurence Hill in the Derry City Council area. (AQO 713/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the Foyle Arts Centre, including the 120-space Laurence Hill car park in Londonderry is owned by Derry City Council. Roads Service has, however, an unrestricted right to use the car park for public car parking. The car park is well used, particularly by those attending the nearby North West Institute.

I understand that, in May 2001, the University of Ulster expressed an interest in acquiring the Centre to facilitate a planned expansion of its campus. The University plans involve the exclusive use of the car park. Since then, Roads Service officials continue to meet with various interested parties in an effort to reach an accommodation whereby the University would agree to provide convenient alternative public parking, thus enabling Roads Service to relinquish its right to continued public parking in the Laurence Hill car park.

Job Vacancies: Central Station, Belfast

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development how many job vacancies have occurred and been filled at Central Station, Belfast in the past 5 years. (AQO 751/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that during the period from January 1996 to date there have been 83 external advertisements for posts in Central Station, Belfast. On some occasions these have been composite advertisements for more than one vacancy. There are 3 current job vacancy advertisements for posts in Central Station and Translink expect some 18 appointments will be made from these advertisements.

Road Markings

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has plans to improve road markings to enhance road safety. (AQO 749/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service undertakes an annual inspection of road markings on all routes. Arising from this inspection, a programme of repainting works is compiled for each district council area. Within these programmes, the works are prioritised to ensure that the worst worn markings are repaired.

In addition to its annual inspections, Roads Service inspects all roads on a regular basis and, where necessary, arrangements are made for road markings to be renewed.

Park and Ride: Larne/Belfast Railway Line

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the utilisation of 'park

and ride' facilities on the railway line between Larne and Belfast. (AQO 758/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that it provides 16, 20, 16, 120, 29 and 34 park and ride spaces at Yorkgate, Whiteabbey, Greenisland, Carrickfergus, Whitehead and Larne Town stations respectively. Whilst it is difficult to be precise about usage throughout the day Translink considers that, based on its estimates and observations, utilisation of these facilities is quite high.

Park and ride facilities can play a valuable part in encouraging a modal shift from private to public transport. Translink will continue to develop existing facilities and provide new and additional ones to meet increased demand, subject to the availability of suitable sites and finance.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

New Build: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has for the provision of new build social housing in North Down. (AQW 1563/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): Current plans for housing provision in North Down over the next 3 year period are as shown in the attached appendix. In summary:

On site	Currently one scheme with 44 homes
2002/03	6 schemes programmed to provide 32 homes
2003/04	7 schemes programmed to provide 132 homes
2004/05	2 schemes programmed to provide 14 homes

The social housing programme is a three-year rolling programme, which is updated annually by my Department in conjunction with the Housing Executive. The Housing Executive's role is to continually reassess housing need. Year 1 of that programme is firm, but at each annual roll forward, the plans for Years 2 and 3 are updated.

Year	Provider	Location	Units	Type of Housing
Currently on site	Oaklee	Balloo Road Phase 3, Bangor	44	Family
2002/03	Oaklee	58 Delmount Court, Bangor	2	Learning Disabilities
	Triangle	31 Grange Avenue, Bangor	4	Learning Disabilities
	Triangle	19 Ambleside Drive, Bangor	5	Learning Disabilities
	Fold	Millbrook Court, Bangor	2	Mental Health

2002/03	Habinteg	Ballymacconnell Rurals, Bangor	9	Family
	Abbeyfield	Ward Avenue, Bangor	10	Elderly
2003/04	Ulidia	Holywood	8	Family
	Habinteg	Abbey Place, Holywood	30	Family
	Choice	Whitehill, Bangor	17	Family
	HA To be identified	Princetown Road, Bangor	18	Elderly
	Fold	Sunnyside House, Bangor	36	Elderly
	HA To be identified	Bangor	15	Family
	HA To be identified	Holywood	8	Family
2004/05	HA To be identified	Bangor	4	Young people leaving care
	HA To be identified	Donaghadee	10	Elderly

House Sales Schemes

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development is there a 'Right to Buy' scheme that permits a tenant to purchase their residence which is owned by the local District Council. (AQW 1566/01)

Mr Dodds: Under the Housing Executive Act (Northern Ireland) 1971, local Councils, New Town Commissions and the Housing Trust were required to transfer all their housing assets to the Housing Executive. I am not aware that any Councils have retained houses, but if they have, those houses are not subject to any House Sales Schemes operated by my Department.

House Sales

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Executive house sales by District Council area in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 1574/01)

Mr Dodds: The information to March 2001, taken from the Annual Report on Housing Statistics published by my Department and formerly by the DOE is as follows:

Council area	1991 ¹	1992/93 ²	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97 ³
Antrim	181	138	179	174	177	154
Ards	159	133	139	157	178	138
Armagh	138	118	167	176	185	129
Ballymena	109	149	187	209	165	158
Ballymoney	63	91	118	138	117	116

Council area	1991 ¹	1992/93 ²	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97 ³
Banbridge	88	93	135	157	128	155
Belfast	283	244	350	407	514	667
Carrickfergus	70	79	122	89	91	72
Castlereagh	106	122	123	154	179	156
Coleraine	131	161	173	191	203	161
Cookstown	53	51	72	105	54	64
Craigavon	168	166	198	274	251	279
Derry	194	184	238	355	454	483
Down	127	129	141	126	172	156
Dungannon	102	128	157	155	126	145
Fermanagh	99	136	190	180	160	202
Larne	74	47	60	58	79	76
Limavady	84	66	100	124	131	115
Lisburn	220	188	244	290	309	252
Magherafelt	79	92	104	128	135	137
Moyle	34	33	57	77	57	62
Newry & Mourne	325	318	304	402	298	236
Newtownabbey	129	105	122	153	138	172
North Down	95	75	84	93	122	102
Omagh	76	92	107	163	130	138
Strabane	103	90	101	158	212	140
All Dwellings	3,290	3,228	3,972	4,693	4,765	4,665

¹ Figures are available for the calendar year only.

² From 1992/93 figures are provided on a financial year basis (April to March each year).

³ From the 1996/97 year the published figures include sales to non-tenants but these are not disaggregated by Council area.

Council area	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02 ¹
Antrim	163	146	128	191	109
Ards	119	136	151	162	156
Armagh	164	180	154	155	137
Ballymena	147	103	134	224	73
Ballymoney	123	88	58	91	71
Banbridge	139	137	134	106	106
Belfast	849	732	1,024	1,079	670
Carrickfergus	107	77	77	138	105
Castlereagh	142	177	140	228	156
Coleraine	204	138	106	159	100
Cookstown	81	71	77	106	49
Craigavon	287	210	193	178	154
Derry	473	409	383	376	311
Down	152	108	141	191	180
Dungannon	135	138	122	109	108
Fermanagh	170	138	136	157	120
Larne	56	73	61	91	36

Council area	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02 ¹
Limavady	129	102	113	123	72
Lisburn	259	256	265	477	415
Magherafelt	131	109	136	131	66
Moyle	66	56	27	63	30
Newry & Mourne	302	340	269	328	218
Newtownabbey	141	173	133	284	191
North Down	84	80	78	121	97
Omagh	122	117	118	140	92
Strabane	162	101	168	149	86
All Dwellings	4,907	4,395	4,526	5,557	3,908

¹ To end December 2001

Annual Stock

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Executive properties by District Council area in each of the last 10 years.

(AQW 1575/01)

Mr Dodds: Information prior to the 1998/99 financial year is not available in the format requested and could only be provided at a disproportionate cost. However, Table 1 gives annual totals for the years 1992/93 to 1997/98. The figures have been taken from the 2000 Northern Ireland Annual Report. Table 2 provides the stock numbers by District Council area for the financial years 1998/99 to 2001/02 (end of December 2001).

TABLE 1 - ANNUAL STOCK TOTAL AT THE END OF EACH FINANCIAL YEAR

Year	Number
1992/93	159,395
1993/94	155,209
1994/95	151,486
1995/96	147,912
1996/97	143,677
1997/98	138,572

TABLE 2 - STOCK NUMBERS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA AT THE END OF EACH FINANCIAL YEAR

District Council	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02
Belfast	33574	31716	30844	29843
North down	3732	3646	3530	3448
Ards	5374	5213	5032	4889
Castlereagh	5412	5199	4974	4827

District Council	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02
Lisburn	9498	9168	8688	8198
Down	3772	3613	3322	3162
Banbridge	2624	2471	2368	2273
Newry & Mourne	5015	4740	4407	4199
Armagh	2972	2816	2648	2525
Craigavon	6476	6105	5768	5571
Dungannon	2681	2540	2430	2324
Fermanagh	3078	2952	2779	2667
Ballymena	4417	4228	3997	3912
Antrim	3897	3679	3491	3287
Newtownabbey	6484	6268	5842	5642
Carrick	3026	2922	2785	2692
Larne	2287	2228	2127	2098
Moyle	1167	1141	1075	1048
Ballymoney	2050	1964	1870	1806
Coleraine	4256	4148	3983	3880
Derry	10466	10091	9703	9403
Limavady	2160	2038	1922	1857
Magherafelt	2059	1913	1788	1728
Strabane	3300	3115	2964	2888
Omagh	2757	2582	2438	2357
Cookstown	1658	1555	1456	1414
Totals	134,192	128,051	122,231	117,938

Housing Association: New Build

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Association new build projects by District Council area in each of the last 10 years.

(AQW 1576/01)

Mr Dodds: The number of Housing Association new build projects by District Council area in each of the last 10 years is detailed in the table on the following page.

Housing Executive: New Build

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Executive new build projects by District Council area in each of the last 10 years.

(AQW 1577/01)

Mr Dodds: The number of Housing Executive new build projects by District Council area in each of the last 10 years is shown in the table on the following page.

HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS PROJECTS STARTED BY DISTRICT COUNCIL 1991/92-2000/01

District Council	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/95	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01	Total
Antrim	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	5
Ards	1	1	6	1	1	0	1	1	4	1	17
Armagh	0	3	2	1	0	0	1	7	1	1	16
Ballymena	1	1	7	1	1	3	1	6	1	2	24
Ballymoney	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	4
Banbridge	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	1	0	6
Belfast	18	15	12	13	10	18	21	31	19	20	177
Carrick	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	3	2	0	11
Castlereagh	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	1	2	0	6
Coleraine	1	2	1	3	1	1	2	2	0	1	14
Cookstown	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	2	0	0	5
Craigavon	1	1	2	4	3	2	0	2	2	1	18
Derry	3	5	7	6	3	11	7	9	6	7	64
Down	2	0	0	0	1	1	2	5	5	0	16
Dungannon	1	0	2	0	2	2	2	6	1	2	18
Fermanagh	0	1	1	3	2	3	4	6	3	6	29
Larne	1	0	2	1	2	1	1	0	0	0	8
Limavady	0	2	1	0	1	1	2	1	2	2	12
Lisburn	3	2	5	1	0	3	4	7	6	1	32
Magherafelt	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	6
Moyle	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	2	0	0	6
Newry & Mourne	1	0	2	3	2	8	4	3	4	1	28
Newtownabbey	2	2	1	1	1	2	0	5	2	1	17
North Down	1	1	1	3	1	0	2	3	4	0	16
Omagh	0	0	3	2	1	2	3	4	2	2	19
Strabane	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	2	4	3	13
Total	41	37	58	48	37	65	64	111	73	53	587

HOUSING EXECUTIVE NEW BUILD PROJECTS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL 1991/92-2000/01

Council	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/95	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01	Total
Antrim	1	1	-	-	2						4
Ards	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	1	1	22
Armagh	1	1	-	2	1		2				7
Ballymena	-	1	4	-	-	2					7
Ballymoney	-	-	1	-	-	2	1		1		5
Banbridge	-	1	1	1	1	1	4				9
Belfast	10	12	14	15	10	12	6	2			81
Carrickfergus	-	-	1	1	-	2	1				5
Castlereagh	2	1	-	-	-	1					4
Coleraine	-	2	1	-	-						3
Cookstown	-	-	-	1	-		1				2

Council	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/95	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01	Total
Craigavon	3	3	2	3	6	2	2				21
Derry	3	6	8	4	4	2	2				29
Down	2	4	5	5	1	7				3	27
Dungannon	-	3	1	1	3	2	1				11
Fermanagh	2	3	2	2	4		1				14
Larne	1	-	-	-	1	1				1	4
Limavady	-	-	3	-					1	1	5
Lisburn	1	3	5	4	3	6	1	1			24
Magherafelt	-	3	3	1	2						9
Moyle	-	1	1	2			1				5
Newry & Mourne	4	1	6	2	5	5	3				26
Newtownabbey	-	-	2	-	1	1	2				6
North Down	1	1	1	-	4	3	1				11
Omagh	1	1	2	2	1	2		1			10
Strabane	4	2	3	5	3	3	1		1		22
Total	39	53	69	54	54	56	32	6	4	6	373

Ederney/Lack: Housing Applications

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Social Development what recognition has the Housing Executive made in their future plans of the demand for public housing in Ederney, Co Fermanagh. (AQW 1578/01)

Mr Dodds: At September 2001 there were 33 housing applicants on the Ederney/Lack waiting list. Of these, 10 are in housing stress (urgent need).

There are currently plans to provide 14 new houses in the Ederney/Lack area.

- Ederney Phase 2. Dungannon and District Housing Association plan to start work on 4 bungalows for elderly people in 2002/03.
- Ederney New Site. Ten bungalows for elderly people are planned for 2004/05. Work is underway to identify a housing association to take this work forward.

The Housing Executive, as the arbiter of housing need in the Province, continues to work closely with the Ederney Community Development Trust on future housing plans.

Urgent Needs Payments

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the number of crisis/budgeting loans which were issued by the Social Security Agency in Strabane to claimants affected by the 1987 flood in Strabane; (b) the total amount of these loans; and (c) the number of loans currently being repaid in respect of this incident. (AQW 1605/01)

Mr Dodds: Following flooding in 1987, as the Social Fund scheme did not exist at the time, the Agency

made 215 recoverable "Urgent Needs Payments" to people in the Strabane area to help them with the damage caused.

To date the Agency has recovered approximately £87,000 out of a total loan figure of £103,000. The amount outstanding is presently £16,000.

The Agency is legally obliged to recover these loans but has had a flexible approach over the last 15 years in view of the distress caused to those affected. To ease the burden, no deadlines were set for repaying the money and 15 people are currently making repayments.

W&G Baird: Printing Costs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for his Department and associated agencies, (a) the total amount of money paid to W & G Baird for printing over the last 5 years; (b) if the work was tendered and awarded to the lowest tender; and (c) if there was any variation from the price quoted to the actual cost paid. (AQW 1613/01)

Mr Dodds: My Department can only respond for the period from 1 December 1999. I can confirm that no contracts were awarded directly or payments made to W & G Baird.

Awareness Seminars

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail progress on the development of proposals for modular pilot contracts in each Housing Executive area within the Rethinking Construction Initiative - External Cyclical Maintenance (ECM) Contracts. (AQW 1641/01)

Mr Dodds: Two Awareness Seminars were held on 23rd and 25th January for staff and interested contractors respectively. A Restricted Procedure Notice will now be placed in the Official Journal of the European Community, inviting interested firms to apply for consideration. Local advertisements will be placed shortly thereafter. Pre-qualification documents will issue during April and tenderers will be shortlisted by early May 2002. Tenders are due to be returned by the end of June 2002 in order for the Housing Executive to implement 5 contracts in each of its areas by October 2002.

Belfast Regeneration Office Strategy

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the measures he has taken as part of the Urban Regeneration Strategy to tackle the most acute areas of deprivation and disadvantage within South Belfast. (AQW 1647/01)

Mr Dodds: The draft Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO) strategy, which has yet to be subjected to public consultation, has been prepared in light of the Urban Regeneration in Northern Ireland – Neighbourhood Renewal strategy and reflects the tenets of New TSN.

Emphasis is placed upon addressing issues of deprivation suffered by individuals, groups and communities throughout Belfast, objectively defined as being most in need. While the draft strategy document does not make specific reference to South Belfast, core wards such as Shaftesbury, Blackstaff and Botanic have been identified as areas suffering from acute levels of deprivation and will clearly benefit from any new strategy.

House Conditions Survey

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Social Development when he is proposing to publish the updated survey of the 1996 House Conditions Survey. (AQW 1658/01)

Mr Dodds: A House Condition Survey is carried out every 5 years, and the preliminary results of the 2001 Survey are expected to be published at the end of April this year. This will cover unfitness, tenure, age, urban/rural location, and some socio-economic characteristics at Northern Ireland level. The full results, including information disaggregated to local council level and covering disrepair, are expected to be available in December 2002.

Cottages in Strabane for Demolition

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the 20 rural cottages in the Strabane area approved for demolition and replacement by the Board of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, on

28 November 2001; and (b) the timescale for this process. (AQW 1666/01)

Mr Dodds: I have asked the Housing Executive to provide you with details of the cottages approved for demolition. The replacements are being provided by North and West Housing Association. However, because of some technical difficulties at a number of the locations, it will be necessary to carry out the work in 3 phases. The first phase, comprising 7 houses, is programmed to start this Spring. The second phase, comprising 8 houses is provisionally programmed to begin in the 2002/03 financial year, while the third phase is provisionally programmed to start in the 2003/04 financial year. However, should the technical difficulties be resolved quicker the Department will bring forward the proposed commencement dates.

Seven Principles of Public Life

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the standards expected for individuals appointed to quangos for which he is responsible. (AQW 1670/01)

Mr Dodds: The standards expected for individuals appointed to the Non-Departmental Public Bodies for which I am responsible are those of the Seven Principles of Public Life as set out by the Nolan Committee. These are:

Selflessness

Holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family or their friends.

Integrity

Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties.

Objectivity

In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merits.

Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

Openness

Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict

information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

Honesty

Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interests.

Leadership

Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

Unemployed Claimants

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by electoral ward, the number of unemployed claimants. (AQW 1673/01)

Mr Dodds: I have provided this information to the Member and placed a copy in the Assembly Library.

ICT Infrastructure

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to enable the Social Security Agency and the Training and Employment Agency to use common ICT communications. (AQW 1715/01)

Mr Dodds: A major project is under way between the Social Security Agency and the Department of Employment and Learning. This will introduce a new

Jobseekers service that will be delivered by staff from both Agencies located in 35 Jobs and Benefits Offices. It will be completed by 2004.

Within the next 12 months a new common ICT infrastructure will be made available to all staff within the co-located office environment enabling access to the IT systems from both organisations.

Board of the Housing Executive

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Social Development why there is no Sinn Féin representative on the Housing Executive Board and what measures he plans to take to rectify this matter. (AQW 1786/01)

Mr Dodds: Appointments to the Board of the Housing Executive are not made on the basis of political affiliation, but rather, in accordance with guidance by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. This requires Departments to publicly advertise vacancies and for the selection of prospective candidates and final appointments to be made on merit. Most recently, this was the case with 4 new members appointed to the Board last November.

Under current legislation, I must appoint 3 persons selected by the Northern Ireland Housing Council from among its members. It is a matter for the Council to decide whom to select.

I have no plans to change the current appointment arrangements.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 15 February 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND THE DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Review of Public Administration

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if the proposed terms for the Review of Public Administration will include an indicative timetable for the progress of that review.

(AQW 1178/01)

Reply: The Review of Public Administration will be a very complex task and will need to be tackled in stages. The first stage is likely to last between 12 and 18 months.

Once details of the Review have been finalised by the Executive, including an indicative timetable, they will be made available to the Assembly.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what proposed budget they intend to allocate to the Review of Public Administration.

(AQW 1181/01)

Reply: The Executive have agreed that resources for the Review of Public Administration will be made available through in-year monitoring. Budget estimates for the Review will be completed once the other details of the Review have been finalised.

Details about the Review, including the proposed budget, will be made available to the Assembly once they have been finalised.

Links with European Union and the USA

Mr Cobain asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister how it intends to strengthen links with the European Union and the USA.

(AQO 641/01)

Reply: The Executive will shortly be considering a draft framework to improve our effectiveness, to strengthen

our links with the European Union and create a common strategy for the Administration. The Strategic Framework will set out a number of action points aimed at developing closer links both with Whitehall Departments on EU matters, with EU institutions and with the Irish Government on EU issues. This will include work which will lead to the identification of specific regions in Europe with which to develop mutually beneficial links. Our effectiveness in operating within the EU has, of course, been greatly assisted by the establishment of the Office of the Executive in Brussels.

We have already taken a number of steps to raise Northern Ireland's profile in the USA by developing the role of the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington.

Last summer the Bureau moved to its own suite of offices in downtown Washington. We have also strengthened the resources of the Bureau by engaging an additional member of staff to act as liaison officer with the US Administration and the media. The Bureau continues to develop and reinforce relationships with key contacts in Congress, the Administration and members of the Irish American community in the US through a series of outreach programmes.

Treatment of Ex-Prisoners

Mrs E Bell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what progress has been made, in conjunction with the NIO, regarding the treatment of ex-prisoners and their families. (AQW 1606/01)

Reply: The Programme for Government acknowledges that ex-prisoners may face particular difficulties re-integrating fully into society and commits the Executive to considering what more might be done to help ex-prisoners overcome barriers to integration.

Some of the issues concerning ex-prisoners are within the scope of the devolved Administration and some rest with the Northern Ireland Office, which has responsibility for legislation on the rehabilitation of offenders. Officials are currently in discussion about how work on ex-prisoner issues might be taken forward.

North/South Ministerial Council

Mr Campbell asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the number of meetings and the subject matters under discussion at North/South Ministerial Council meetings in their various formats, over the past three years.

(AQW 1737/01)

Reply: The North/South Ministerial Council has met on 50 occasions since December 1999. There have been three plenary meetings, 46 sectoral meetings and one meeting in institutional format. The joint communiqués

of the meetings, which set out the subject matters under discussion, have been placed in the Assembly Library.

Civic Forum

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the work of the Civic Forum in the last 12 months. (AQW 1751/01)

Reply: During the last 12 months the Civic Forum has responded to the Executive's progress report on the first Programme for Government and has submitted a comprehensive response to the draft Programme for Government published in September last year. The Forum has also responded to a number of consultation papers issued by Northern Ireland Departments including:

- Investing for Health;
- The Role of the Commissioner for Children;
- The Review of Community Relations Policy;
- Employability and Long-term unemployment; and
- The Victims Strategy.

It has made submissions to the Independent Review Body on Post Primary Education and the draft Bill of Rights published by the Human Rights Commission.

The Civic Forum is currently developing contributions on four key areas; Lifelong Learning, Combating Poverty, Building a Plural Society and Creating a More Sustainable Northern Ireland.

The Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels

Mr Poots asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what are the rental costs for the Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels.

(AQO 763/01)

Reply: The annual rental for the ground floor premises of the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive is 110,705.40 euros, which equates to £68,548 at the current exchange rates.

Working Group on Social Exclusion of Older People

Mr McMenamin asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what measures it intends to take to ensure the social inclusion of older people.

(AQO 742/01)

Reply: By December we will set up a working group that will include appropriate Departments, statutory agencies and representatives of the voluntary sector to consider factors that cause older people to be at risk of social exclusion and develop a co-ordinated strategy

through which Departments and others can work together to tackle the problems faced by older people.

Review of Flags, Emblems and Graffiti

Mr McCarthy asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if it will give an update on the work of the Interdepartmental Working Group on the removal of flags, emblems and graffiti.

(AQO 730/01)

Reply: At present there is no Interdepartmental Working Group. In the draft Programme for Government, we are committed to support local communities in dealing with matters of dispute and division, including the proliferation of sectarian graffiti, unauthorised flag flying, the erection of memorials and other issues that can lead to community tensions.

Proposals to implement this commitment will be considered in the context of the review of community relations policy.

Programme for Government

Mr Close asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what percentage of targets in this year's Programme for Government will be met by the end of March 2002.

(AQO 732/01)

Reply: The Executive's first Programme for Government covers the years from April 2001, with a particular focus on the current financial year. It includes 256 specific actions spanning a period of five years.

At the end of December 2001, 24% of the 256 actions had already been achieved and a further 50% were in line for achievement within the timescales published in the Programme for Government.

Where progress has been slower than anticipated, the Executive will be looking at the reasons for this and at the remedial action that might be taken.

Promoting Community Relations

Mr Gibson asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what partnership initiatives are available to the Unionist community in West Tyrone to promote community relations.(AQO 729/01)

Reply: The Peace II programme makes provision for distinctive approaches to meeting local needs through locally based regeneration strategies which are sensitive to local needs. In Northern Ireland these strategies will be developed and implemented by the new Local Strategy Partnerships being established in each of the 26 district council areas. The objective is to ensure a more integrated and sustainable approach

to planning and managing the use of resources available at the local level.

In Northern Ireland the new Partnerships will be responsible for implementing two Measures under Priority 3 of the Peace Programme:

Measure 1 – “Local Economic Initiatives for Developing the Social Economy”; and

Measure 2 – “Locally-based Human Resource, Training and Development Strategies”.

The first Measure has a financial allocation of £38·548m, while the second has an allocation of £35·471m. This makes a total allocation of £74·019m available for distribution among the 26 Local Strategy Partnerships. The proposed allocations to Omagh and Strabane Local Strategy Partnerships total over £4 million.

Issues such as localised sectarian tensions are a particular focus for the Peace II programme. One of the Measures which is entitled "Reconciliation for Sustainable Peace" will be administered by the Community Relations Council, which is sponsored by our Department. While Partnerships do not have direct financial responsibility for these Measures, they can and should play a key role in influencing decisions on the allocation of funding to address such problems in their local area.

Late Answers

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQO 730/01 and AQO 732/01, to explain why written answers have yet to be provided to the Members concerned, and what percentage of answers have been outside the specified period in this session. (AQW 1996/01)

Reply: Written answers to AQO730/01 and AQO 732/01 were provided on 14 and 13 February 2002 respectively.

Figures provided by the Business Office indicate that some 50% of written answers from our Department have been provided outside the specified period this session. Steps are being taken to improve the situation.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Government Subsidies for Agrienvironment Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what criteria will be used to enable farmers to qualify for Government subsidies under environmental schemes. (AQW 1741/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The three Northern Ireland agri-environment schemes are the Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) Scheme, Countryside Management Scheme (CMS) and Organic Farming Scheme (OFS).

Entry to all three schemes is voluntary. Application to the ESA scheme is open to all farmers with land in one of the five designated Environmentally Sensitive Areas (the Mourne and Slieve Croob; Antrim Glens and Rathlin; Sperrins; Fermanagh Lakeland and Slieve Gullion). The five ESAs cover approximately 20% of Northern Ireland's total land area.

Application to the CMS is open to all farmers with land outside the designated Environmentally Sensitive Areas. Only those farms offering the greatest environmental benefits can be admitted into the scheme, and a ranking and scoring system is applied to each application. As with the ESA scheme, CMS applicants must also be able to satisfy scheme requirements on the management of habitats and features on the farm and pollution control.

Application to the OFS is open to all farmers wishing to convert from conventional to organic production methods. However, applicants must first register their farm with a recognised organic sector body.

Rural Development Programme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what financial assistance is available to promote rural tourism and what funding has been paid to date. (AQW 1743/01)

Ms Rodgers: Within my Department the financial assistance to promote rural tourism is offered through the Rural Development Programme. Under the new Rural Development Programme we anticipate tourism projects to feature in all elements of the Programme. Similarly each element of the Rural Development Programme, which ran from 1994 to 1999, supported some activity which had a direct or indirect impact on tourism.

Rural Development Programme 2001-06

The main tourism measure under the new Programme is the Natural Resource Rural Tourism Initiative which is being developed in conjunction with the Environment and Heritage Service and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. This Peace II measure will support tourism projects that utilise the natural resources of Northern Ireland's rural areas. The Initiative is worth approximately £15 million.

The Rural Development Programme will also deliver a tourism-related Peace II measure that will assist rural communities to promote local identity, culture and heritage, with an emphasis on peace and reconciliation.

The Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity will also have a tourism-related measure which will support local, area-based or sectoral projects and programmes to develop a quality tourism product in rural areas.

The LEADER+ element of the Programme also has scope to support small scale innovative tourism initiatives. Eight of the recently appointed Local Action Groups which will deliver LEADER+ have included tourism-related themes in their development strategies.

Under INTERREG III, a proposed Rural Initiative will also offer opportunities for cross-border tourism. However, this measure is still under negotiation.

No funding has yet been paid under the new Rural Development Programme.

Rural Development Programme 1994-99

The following are a few examples of the type of projects which were funded under the 1994-99 Rural Development Programme, and the level of support offered.

SINGLE PROGRAMME FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Ardglass Boat Park	£350,975
Portneal Fishing Lodge	£18,400
An Creagan Visitor Centre	£49,500
Ti Chullain Cultural Centre	£377,000
Fishing Villages Programme	£20,000
Slieve Gullion Courtyard Tourism Facility	£49,543
Ring of Gullion Equestrian Tourism Centre	£269,500
Sion Mills river amenity	£45,000

A range of tourist accommodation, eg in the Glenelly, Killeel and Owenkillew areas.

LEADER II PROGRAMME

OVER £2.5 MILLION OF LEADER II FUNDS WERE SPENT ON TOURISM RELATED PROJECTS, EXAMPLES ARE AS FOLLOWS:

Activity holidays in the Sperrins	£18,319
Camping Barns in North Antrim	£46,000
Kinallen Craft Centre	£6,000
Regional Tourism training Network in South Down/South Armagh	£30,000
Rural Cottage Holidays	£200,000

INTERREG III

Sliabh Beagh Walking Trails	£40,000
Kesh Millennium Boat Park	£356,000
Lough Erne Wildfowl Reserve	£245,000

Tully Mill, Florence Court	£233,750
Rural Craft Centre, Ballycastle	£139,400
Drumaheglis Marina and Caravan Park	£270,000
Derrygonnelly Field Study Centre	£356,000
Attical Tourist Hostel Accommodation	£225,000
PESCA	
Tidewater tourist facility, Ardglass	£11,000
Ardglass Viking tourism project	£10,678

I understand from colleagues in the Northern Ireland Tourist Board that it has responsibility for delivering the Marketing the Region as a Tourism Destination measure of the Peace II Programme. This measure is targeted at marketing Northern Ireland's natural and cultural resources and at investing in indigenous tourism events and visitor management. This measure is worth approx £10 million and is intended to complement DARD's NRRT Initiative.

To date the NITB has committed £1,018,029 under the Peace II Programme.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Belfast Festival at Queen's: Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding he has awarded to the Belfast Festival at Queen's in each of the last three years. (AQW 1693/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): Government funding in support of the arts in Northern Ireland, including Belfast Festival at Queen's is mainly distributed through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. In this instance my Department also provided additional funding to the Belfast Festival at Queen's through the Northern Ireland Events Company. The figures are as follows:

	1999/2000 £	2000/2001 £	2001/2002 £
Northern Ireland Events Company	150,000	100,000	*100,000
Arts Council of Northern Ireland	105,000	92,500	92,500
Lottery Funding	69,636	86,500	250,444
Totals	324,636	279,000	442,944

* (Agreed subject to successful completion of application process)

Irish Football Association

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the cost of youth development to the Irish Football Association in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 1695/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is a matter for the Irish Football Association as the governing body for soccer, and you may wish to approach the Irish Football Association directly for this information.

You may wish to note that the annual Sports Council grant to the IFA for youth development has been £50,000 in each of the years 1996-97, 1997-98, 1998-99, 1999-2000, and 2001-02. No figures are available prior to 1996-97.

You may also wish to note that youth development was one of the key issues identified as being central to the development of a soccer strategy in Northern Ireland. I would refer you to chapter 4 of the report 'Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland'. I hope to publish a draft strategy as soon as possible.

Irish Football Association

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of public money, including Sports Council funding, given to the Irish Football Association in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 1697/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is a matter for the Irish Football Association as the governing body for soccer. You may therefore wish to approach the Irish Football Association directly for this information.

You may wish to note that the funding provided by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland is as detailed on the attached annex.

IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION – SPORTS COUNCIL FUNDING (AQW 1697/01)

Year	Youth Development £	Lottery £	City Sport £	Home Events Programme £	Safe Sports Grounds £	Totals £
95/96		22,400	100,000			122,400
96/97	50,000		100,000			150,000
97/98	50,000		100,000			150,000
98/99	50,000		50,000	4,000		104,000
99/00	50,000			2,000		52,000
00/01	50,000	539,186		4,000	30,000	623,186
01/02	50,000			2,500		52,500
Total	300,000	561,586	350,000	12,500	30,000	1,254,086

No figures are available prior to 95/96

Milk Cup Tournament

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assessment of the withdrawal of £5,000 grant aid towards the Milk Cup by the Irish Football Association. (AQW 1696/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The decision to withdraw £5,000 from the Milk Cup Tournament is a matter for the Irish Football Association as the governing body for soccer and you may wish to approach the Irish Football Association directly about this matter.

I can, however, say that I regard the Milk Cup Tournament as a prestigious event, and you may wish to note that the Northern Ireland Events Company provided funding of £90,000 towards the 2001 Milk Cup Tournament and is considering funding the 2002 Tournament.

Irish Football Association's Youth Development Programme

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assessment of the Irish Football Association's Youth Development Programme. (AQW 1698/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland, which provides funding towards the Irish Football Association Youth Development Programme, considers that the programme is effective in delivering a learning environment, which is fun-filled, challenging and which promotes fair play and sportsmanship.

I can also inform you that youth development was one of the key issues identified as being central to the development of a soccer strategy in Northern Ireland. I would refer you to chapter 4 of the report 'Creating a

Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland'. I hope to be in a position to publish a draft strategy as soon as possible.

Heritage Lottery Fund: Townscape Heritage Initiative

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the allocation and distribution of Heritage Lottery Fund monies including the Townscape Heritage Initiative, to grant-aid work to listed buildings and conservation areas, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1705/01)

Mr McGimpsey: During the last five financial years, 123 grants were awarded by the Heritage Lottery Fund in Northern Ireland to grant-aid work to listed buildings and conservation areas, including the Townscape Heritage Initiative, totalling £30,199,094. A breakdown of the awards is attached.

Details of all Lottery Awards made by all National Lottery Distributing Bodies across the UK can be accessed through the Awards Search on the Web Site of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport at www.culture.gov.uk/lottery/index.html

1997/98

Applicant	Project	Awarded £
Ballinderry Parish Church	St John, Ballinderry – Restoration	41,100
Bessbrook Institute Management Committee	Bessbrook Institute - Refurbishment	258,000
Castlereagh Borough Council	Lock Keeper's Cottage, Newforge – Acquisition	27,500
Crom Church Trust	Holy Trinity Church, Derryvore – Restoration	56,000
Fermanagh District Council	Orange Hall Interactive Technology Centre, Enniskillen	603,000
Hearth Revolving Fund	Curry's Cottage, Corry - Acquisition	94,500
Irish Landmark Trust	Ballealy Cottage - Restoration	129,000
Our Lady of Bethlehem Abbey	Portglenone House Refurbishment	412,500
St George's Church, Belfast	St George's Church, Belfast – Restoration	367,000
St John's Church, Moy	St John's Church, Moy - Restoration	74,100
St John, Dunnalong	St John, Dunnalong - Refurbishment	240,000
St Joseph, Claudy	St Joseph, Claudy – Refurbishment	196,000
St Nailes Church, Enniskillen	St Nailes Church, Enniskillen – Refurbishment	159,600

Applicant	Project	Awarded £
St Thomas Parish Church	St Thomas, Belfast - Hill Organ	94,700
Termonmaguirke Parish Council	St Columbkille's Church, Carrickmore – Repairs	85,400
Trustees of Diocese of Down and Connor	St Matthews Church, Belfast - Stonework Restoration	978,380
Total		3,816,780

1998/99

Applicant	Project	Awarded £
African Missions Northern Ireland Ltd	Dromantine College, Newry – Refurbishment	718,500
Antrim Borough Council	Antrim Town Wall Restoration	37,700
Armagh City & District Council	Loughgall Estate Restoration	200,000
Bangor Parish Church, Church of Ireland	St Comgalls Church, Bangor - Repairs	167,300
Belfast City Council	Albert Clock Restoration - Belfast	1,064,000
Board of Trustees of Archdale Centre, Lisnaskea	Archdale Centre, Lisnaskea – Restoration	310,000
Brackaville Parish	Holy Trinity Church, Coalisland – Repairs	121,500
Caledon Regeneration Partnership Ltd	Caledon Conservation and Enhancement Programme	10,000
Caledon Regeneration Partnership Ltd	Caledon Conservation and Enhancement Programme	750,000
Canal Street Area Heritage Partnership	Canal Street Area Regeneration Project Townscape Heritage Initiative	10,000
Cathedral Board, St Patricks Cathedral Armagh	St Patricks Cathedral, Armagh – Restoration	464,500
Down Lisburn Health and Social Services Trust	Downshire Hospital Great Hall, Downpatrick – Restoration	500,000
Downpatrick Property Trust	Downpatrick & Castlewellan Townscape Heritage Initiative	10,000
Downpatrick Property Trust	Downpatrick Townscape Heritage Initiative	600,000
Dungiven Community Development Ltd	Dungiven Castle - Refurbishment	373,500
Fermanagh District Council	International Mimmers Festival	12,000
First Presbyterian Church, Newry	First Presbyterian Church, Newry - Restoration	144,050
Glenariff Parish Trust	Glenariff Church Stonework Restoration	120,000

Applicant	Project	Awarded £
Kilbride Parish	Kilbride Church, Doagh - Restoration	48,700
Leckpatrick Parish	St Josephs Church, Glenmornan – Repairs	100,000
Omagh District Council	Omagh Markets	25,000
Omagh Renewal & Beyond/Omagh District Council	Omagh Townscape Heritage Initiative	900,000
Palatine Trust	Palatine Square Project, Killough	10,000
Palatine Trust	Palatine Square Project, Killough	375,000
Parish Church of St George	St Georges Church, Belfast - Phase II	267,500
Parish of Derryloran: Diocese of Armagh	St Luran's Church, Derryloran - Repairs	295,000
Parish of Lissan, Church of St Michael's	St Michael's Church, Lissan - Repairs	63,420
Royal Society of Ulster Architects	Exhibition of Christian Architecture in Ireland	60,000
Saintfield Town Committee	Saintfield Conservation Area Townscape Heritage Initiative	10,000
Saintfield Town Committee	Saintfield Conservation Area Townscape Heritage Initiative	165,000
St Columb's Diocesan Trust	St Columb's Hall, Londonderry – Extension	643,400
Templecorran Parish Church	Templecorran Parish Church, Ballycarry – Restoration	219,000
Thornhill Centre (Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy)	Thornhill Centre, Londonderry – Refurbishment	354,000
United Parishes of Templepatrick and Donegore	St John's Church, Donegore - Repairs	132,000
University of Ulster	Magee College, Londonderry - Repairs	213,000
Workspace (Draperstown) Ltd	The Drapers' Town - Townscape Heritage Initiative	10,000
Workspace (Draperstown) Ltd	The Drapers' Town - Townscape Heritage Initiative	1,200,000
Total		10,704,070

1999/2000

Applicant	Project	Awarded £
All Saints Church, Ballymena	All Saints Church, Ballymena – Refurbishment	92,000

Applicant	Project	Awarded £
Ballymore Parish Church	Ballymore Parish Church Millennium Legacy Project	95,000
Cairde	Discovering Ones Heritage	500
Canal Street Area Heritage Partnership	Canal Street Regeneration Project	10,000
Carnlough Community Development Group	Carnlough Townscape Heritage Initiative	10,000
Diocese of Dromore, Saval Parish	St Colmans Church, Shinn - Restoration	117,500
Dungannon District Council	Dungannon Townscape Heritage Initiative	10,000
Dromore Town Heritage Group	Dromore Town Townscape Heritage Initiative	10,000
Fivemiletown Community Support Association	Fivemiletown Heritage Start-up Programme	5,000
Foyle Civic Trust	Londonderry - Walled City Heritage Group THI	10,000
Garvagh Development Trust	Garvagh Heritage & Regeneration Project	150,000
Lisburn Development Limited	Bridge Street, Lisburn Townscape Heritage Initiative	10,000
Loughbrickland and District Community Association	Loughbrickland History Trail	5,000
Newtownbutler Community Together	Pilgrimage to Galloon Island	4,570
Randlestown Historical Society	Making Sense of the Census	3,290
Randlestown Arches Association	Randlestown Townscape Heritage Initiative	10,000
Middletown and District Community Development Association	Heritage Signage in Middletown District	2,500
Mullaghduon Community Association	Images of Mullaghduon	2,600
Newbuildings Community & Environmental Association	Our Past, Our Present, Our Future, Newbuildings	3,184
Newcastle Glee Singers	Annesley Hall, Newcastle	274,000
Newtownstewart Development Association Ltd	Newtownstewart Townscape Heritage Initiative	10,000
Non-subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland	Rademon Church, Crossgar - Refurbishment	222,500
Portrush Community Enterprises	Old Post Office, Portrush - Restoration	140,000
Roe Valley Community Properties	Roe Valley Hospital, Limavady	11,200

Applicant	Project	Awarded £
Select Vestry, Donaghendry Parish Church	St Patricks Church, Donaghendry - Restoration	80,000
Select Vestry, Lambeg Parish Church	Lambeg Parish Church Restoration	187,000
Select Vestry, Parish of Ballywillan	Holy Trinity Church Restoration Project, Portrush	100,000
Select Vestry, Parish of Kilcoo, Bryansford	Kilcoo Parish Church, Bryansford - Refurbishment	94,500
Select Vestry, Parish of Killinchy Union	St Marys Church Hall, Kilmood - Repairs	128,000
Select Vestry, Parish of Whitehead & Islandmagee	St Johns Parish Church, Islandmagee - Restoration	68,600
Select Vestry, St Johns Parish Church, Glynn & Raloo	St Johns Church, Glynn - Repairs	100,000
Servite Order of Ireland	60 Main Street, Benburb - Restoration	178,500
St John the Baptist Church, Granaghan	St John the Baptist Church, Granaghan - Refurbishment	283,200
St Marys Parish, Bellaghy	St Marys Church, Bellaghy - Restoration	316,000
St Michaels Parish Church, Enniskillen	St Michaels Parish Art Conservation Project, Enniskillen	67,100
St Patricks Diocesan Trust	Market House, Middletown - Refurbishment	185,000
Termoneeny Community Group	Lavey Heritage Trail	4,400
Termonmaguirk Historical Society	Termonmaguirk 2000	4,000
Trustees of the Diocese of Down & Connor	St Peters RC Cathedral, Belfast - Restoration	58,600
Ulster Architectural Heritage Society	Ulster Architectural Heritage Society Education Programme	87,300
Total		3,151,044

2000/2001

Applicant	Project	Awarded £
Antrim Towns Development Company Ltd.	Antrim Townscape Heritage Initiative	10,000
Canal Street Area Heritage Partnership	Canal Street Regeneration Project	1,100,000
Carnlough Community Development Group	Carnlough Townscape Heritage Initiative	300,000

Applicant	Project	Awarded £
Dromore Town Heritage Group	Dromore Town Townscape Heritage Initiative	690,000
Dungannon District Council	Dungannon Townscape Heritage Initiative	500,000
Foyle Civic Trust	The Walled City - Townscape Heritage Initiative	10,000
Hearth Housing Association	Castle Upton - Gate Lodge	151,500
Irish Association of Change Ringers, Northern District	Greyabbey Bell Tower	14,700
Lisburn Development Limited	Bridge Street, Lisburn Townscape Heritage Initiative	700,000
Newtownabbey Borough Council	Sentry Hill Conservation and Development	416,500
Newtownstewart Development Association Ltd	Newtownstewart Townscape Heritage Initiative	400,000
Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church, Comber	Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church, Comber - Repairs	88,000
Randalstown Arches Association	Randalstown Townscape Heritage Initiative	490,000
Select Vestry of the Parish of Whitehead and Islandmagee	St Patrick's Church, Whitehead	190,000
Sisters of Mercy	St. Josephs Home, Warrenpoint	148,000
The CoI, Representative Church Body, St John's Church	St John's Parish Church, Kilwarlin - Refurbishment	225,000
Trustees of St Patricks Parish, Downpatrick	St Patricks Parish, Downpatrick	75,200
Total		5,508,900

2001/2002

Applicant	Project	Awarded £
Antrim Towns Development Company Ltd.	Antrim Townscape Heritage Initiative	300,000
Belfast Buildings Preservation Trust	Christchurch Centre of Excellence	1,217,000
Church of Ireland	St Patricks Parish Church, Leckpatrick	333,500
Foyle Civic Trust	The Walled City - Townscape Heritage Initiative	1,000,000
Lisnaskea Community Enterprises Ltd	Lisnaskea Townscape Heritage Initiative	15,000

Mourne Heritage Trust	Mourne Homesteads	49,300
Newry and Mourne District Council	Bagenal's Castle, Newry	90,000
Roe Valley Community Properties	Roe Valley Hospital, Limavady	1,084,000
Sisters of Cross and Passion	Drumalis House, Larne – Restoration	913,500
St Columbs Diocesan Trust	St Patricks Church, Pennyburn	496,000
St Patrick's Archdiocesan Trust Ltd	St Patrick's Cathedral, Armagh	1,200,000
The Select Vestry of Newtownards Parish	St Marks Church, Newtownards	130,000
Trustees of St Patrick's Parish Church	St Patrick's Church, Newry	190,000
Total		7,018,300

Irish Football Association

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assessment of the current structure of the Irish Football Association. [R]* (AQW 1718/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The current structure of the Irish Football Association is a matter for the Irish Football Association as the governing body for soccer, but I can inform you that the issues of governance and administration were among the issues identified as being central to the development of a soccer strategy for Northern Ireland. I would refer you to chapter 1 of the report 'Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland'. I hope to be in a position to publish a draft strategy as soon as possible.

Football For All

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assessment of the Irish Football Association's community relations programme Football For All. [R]* (AQW 1719/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland has been working with the Irish Football Association on its community relations programme Football for All.

I can also inform you that the issue of Community Relations was one of the issues identified as being central to the development of a soccer strategy for Northern Ireland. I would refer you to chapter 10 of the report 'Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland'. I hope to be in a position to publish a draft strategy as soon as possible.

Although there is much work to be done, I believe that the Football for All programme, along with the proposed soccer strategy and the broader equality agenda, has the potential to contribute to an improvement in community relations in Northern Ireland.

Soccer Strategy: Implementation

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how he proposes to implement those recommendations contained in 'Creating a Soccer Strategy' following the end of the consultation period on 31 January 2002. [R]* (AQW 1720/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Following careful consideration of the comments received from the consultation exercise, I hope to be in a position to publish a draft strategy for the development of soccer in Northern Ireland as soon as possible. I envisage that this will include proposed actions involving my Department as well as other key organisations involved in soccer.

Newtownards Library

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of money spent on Newtownards Public Library by the South Eastern Education and Library Board in each of the last five years. (AQW 1779/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The following table details expenditure by the South Eastern Education and Library Board on Newtownards Library over the past complete five years.

April 2000 to March 2001	£107,926
April 1999 to March 2000	£87,896
April 1998 to March 1999	£110,864
April 1997 to March 1998	£123,850
April 1996 to March 1997	£126,154
Expenditure from April 2001 to December 2001 amounted to £114,529.	

Golden Jubilee

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the events that he intends to organise to celebrate Her Majesty The Queen's Golden Jubilee. (AQW 1781/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has initiated an extensive campaign to

* Registered Interest

encourage community groups, schools, churches and organisations to plan events. These plans will be submitted to the Golden Jubilee Office, allowing a comprehensive publication to be printed, detailing the events organised to celebrate the Golden Jubilee throughout Northern Ireland in 2002.

This process is further supported by the Department's commitment to grant aid groups who are planning a Jubilee event, by offering a non-lottery grants scheme. This works in conjunction with the joint Lottery distributors scheme Awards for All. These schemes ensure that financial help is available to most groups in Northern Ireland who wish to organise an event.

Working in conjunction with the Golden Jubilee themes suggested by Buckingham Palace, which are outlined in the attached leaflet, the Department has been keen to encourage community involvement, and celebrations organised by the community, for the community. Consequently, we are constantly reviewing the programme and details we have, before committing to organising a major event for the Golden Jubilee ourselves.

My Department is keen to fund community initiatives, which will be spread throughout Northern Ireland. The provisional programme to date shows a wide interest in celebrating the Golden Jubilee with events planned across the Province.

Motorcycle Racing: Insurance

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what representations he intends to make to insurance companies on the issue of premiums for motorcycle racing teams. (AQW 1783/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The issue of insurance cover for motorcycle racing teams is a matter for individual race teams and team sponsors and is not a matter which I can, nor would it be appropriate for me to, intervene in.

I am, however, acutely aware of the potential impact of the Robert Dunlop incident on the sport and I understand that the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland has made representations to its insurance broker, with a view to putting together a competitive insurance package to safeguard teams, sponsors and personnel in the future.

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps is he taking to assist the Motor Cycle Union with the present problems of insurance cover. (AQW 1818/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The issue of insurance cover for motorcycle racing teams is a matter for individual race teams and team sponsors, and is not a matter which I can, nor would it be appropriate for me to, intervene in.

I am, however, acutely aware of the potential impact of the Robert Dunlop incident on the sport and I understand that the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland has made representations to its insurance broker, with a view to putting together a competitive insurance package to safeguard teams, sponsors and personnel in the future.

Independent Review: Library Service

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assessment he can make in relation to the job evaluation review in the Library Service, which began in 1995, and the system provided for grading jobs; and to make a statement. (AQW 1884/01)

Mr McGimpsey: During 1994 job evaluations were formally introduced for all white-collar staff in the Education and Library Boards to provide necessary accountability reassurance to Chief Executives. In recognition that the process would be a long one, Chief Executives agreed that staff should not be disadvantaged and payments would be backdated to the date when additional duties/responsibilities were first undertaken or to 1 January 1995, whichever was the later. The system used was a widely accepted job evaluation method devised by the Greater London Whitley Council.

My Department undertook an independent review to establish the robustness of the process. That review has confirmed that the job evaluation has been carried out correctly and that the results are robust and defensible. My Department was unable to meet the resulting costs within existing resources. Accordingly it was agreed to meet the back pay bill and the on-going costs from central resources and I welcomed this decision.

EDUCATION

Portavogie Primary School: Redevelopment Work

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the plans for redevelopment work at Portavogie Primary School; and (b) the timescale for the completion of any such work; and to make a statement. (AQW 1618/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): I understand that the South Eastern Education and Library Board plans to provide a new car parking area and playground at Portavogie Primary School and to carry out other improvements to the site. The Board hopes that the bulk of the work will be completed by Easter.

Management of Schools: Sub-Committees

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the make-up of the sub-committee of the SEELB's Committee for the Management of Schools.

(AQW 1659/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The South Eastern Education and Library Board have confirmed the composition of the Management of Schools sub-committees as:

North Down	Councillor Mrs R M Dunlop
	Mrs E M Robinson
	Rev Dr D J Watts
	Councillor Mrs A Wilson
Lisburn	Mrs F A Gault
	Mr D G Mullan
	Miss M G Tigchelaar
	Councillor W M Ward
	Councillor W G Watson
Castlereagh	Councillor Mrs R M Dunlop
	Alderman C Hall
	Mr J D Uprichard
	Mrs J Williams
Ards	Rev Dr J P O Barry
	Mr S I Davidson
	Councillor R Gibson
	Rev Dr R A Russell
Down	Councillor G N Douglas
	Mr D Cahill
	Mr M P Flanagan
	Mrs M M Magorran

Management of Schools

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the grounds, if any, on which the sub-committee of the SEELB's Committee on the Management of Schools can recommend the removal of any individual from the Board of Governors of a school.

(AQW 1660/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Members of the Board of Governors of Controlled and Maintained Schools are appointed for a period of four years co-terminus with that of the education and library boards. The re-appointment of the education and library board representatives who have completed a four year term is a matter for determination by the board.

In accordance with the Scheme of Management for Schools, the following persons are disqualified from the membership of Boards of Governors:

- a person, other than a teacher, who is employed for the purposes of the school, or for the purpose of non-school activities;
- a person who within the previous five years has been convicted by a court in Northern Ireland or elsewhere in the British Islands of any offence and received a prison sentence of not less than three months without the option of a fine;
- a person who is adjudged bankrupt or who has made a composition or arrangement with his creditors.

Management of Schools

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the terms of reference used by the sub-committee of the SEELB's Committee for Management of Schools.

(AQW 1661/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The South Eastern Education and Library Board has confirmed that the Management of Schools sub-committees were established to take forward the reconstitution of the Boards of Governors of schools for the period 2001-05. In particular the sub-committees:

- allocate Board Members to school Boards of Governors;
- consider attendance records of current Board representatives;
- note current Board representatives who do not wish to serve another term;
- consider applications from those who have expressed a wish to serve as an Board representative; and
- appoint Board representatives and draw up a reserve list where possible.

Professional Teaching Qualifications

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) if Protestant trainee school teachers are eligible for employment at schools with a Roman Catholic ethos; and, if not, (b) to state if there are any routes that Protestant trainee school teachers can follow in order to become eligible for employment at a school with a Roman Catholic ethos. (AQW 1667/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Provided requirements as to age and health are satisfied, my Department requires a professional teaching qualification, normally a Bachelor of Education degree or a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education, for a person to be eligible to teach in any grant-aided school. It is then a matter for employing authorities, including the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, to set any specific criteria for particular posts, such as, where appropriate, the possession of the Catholic Religious Education Certificate.

Standards in Public Life

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to outline the standards expected for individuals appointed to quangos for which he is responsible. (AQW 1672/01)

Mr M McGuinness: All individuals appointed to non-departmental public bodies for which my Department is responsible are expected to abide by the Seven Principles of Public Life, recommended by the Nolan Committee. These principles are as follows:

- Selflessness – decision-making should be based on public interest with no personal gain;
- Integrity – appointees should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation which might influence them in their official duties;
- Objectivity – appointees should make choices solely on merit when carrying out their business;
- Accountability – appointees should be accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and will submit themselves to public scrutiny;
- Openness – appointees should be open about their decisions and actions and comply fully with the principles of the Citizens Charter and the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information;
- Honesty – any private interests which may conflict with their public duties will be declared by members; and
- Leadership – appointees should provide and support these principles by leadership and example in the conduct of business.

Appointees are issued with a copy of the 'Guidance on Codes of Best Practice for Board Members of Public Bodies'.

Education at Home

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of children currently being educated at home by choice; and (b) how this figure was compiled and substantiated. (AQW 1724/01)

Mr M McGuinness: This information is not available. My Department will give consideration to the collection of information about the number of children whose parents choose to have them educated at home as part of the annual statistical returns provided by the Education and Library Boards. It will be August of this year before the next return is commissioned.

Drug Education

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to list the drugs education material and resources that have

been approved by the Department and made available to schools. (AQW 1725/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department does not specify materials and resources for use in schools. The choice of teaching aids for the delivery of drugs education is, therefore, a matter for schools themselves. In 1996 my Department issued comprehensive guidance to schools on how to develop a drug education policy and how to deal with drug-related incidents on school premises.

Drug Education

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education how much funding and support has been made available to schools for the provision of drug education, broken down by education authority, for each of the last three years. (AQW 1726/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is not possible to quantify the amount of money spent on drug education in schools, as drug education programmes are, for the most part, delivered as part of the statutory curriculum and therefore funded through schools' budgets. Under the Northern Ireland Drug Strategy, additional funding of approximately £800,000 for two years was allocated to the education sector in March 2000 to enable drug education provision to be strengthened.

Specialist Teachers

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education how many specialist teachers for deaf children are currently employed in each Education Authority. (AQW 1787/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Education and Library Boards employ both peripatetic teachers of the hearing impaired and teachers in special education units for the hearing impaired attached to primary and secondary schools. The current situation is as follows: -

Board	Peripatetics	Unit Teachers
Belfast	4	7 +2 part-time
Western	3 + 1 vacant post	6
North Eastern	7	2
South Eastern	5	4 + 1 part-time
Southern	4 + 1 part-time	2

In addition Jordanstown Special School, in the North Eastern Board area, makes provision for both auditory- and hearing-impaired pupils.

New Build: Tor Bank Special School

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the current position in relation to the New Build for Tor Bank Special School. (AQW 1802/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Planning of a new school is being taken forward by the South Eastern Education and Library Board and the school is being considered for a place in the capital programme in the light of the resources available.

Study of Languages in Secondary-Level Schools

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education what measures he has put in place to promote the learning of foreign languages in secondary schools. (AQW 1847/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is important that we should do all we can to encourage people of all ages to become familiar with at least one language other than their own. The statutory curriculum here requires all secondary-level schools to offer pupils the opportunity to study one of the main European languages in order to prepare them for living and working in an increasingly global and European-based economy.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment will be specifically addressing the issue of language provision as part of the current Curriculum Review.

Vocational Qualifications: CCEA

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Education what plans does he have to provide vocational qualifications through CCEA. (AQO 792/01)

Mr M McGuinness: CCEA will offer new vocational qualifications known as GCSE "Double Awards" from September 2002. The subjects on offer will comprise: Art and Design; Business; Engineering; Health and Social Care; Information and Communication Technology; Leisure and Tourism; Manufacturing; and Science. It is planned that this range of subjects will be increased from 2004.

National Association of Head Teachers

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education how he intends to respond to the National Association of Head Teachers' recent vote for industrial action. (AQO 794/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I met with senior officials of the National Association of Head Teachers on 17

January to hear their views on pay differentials for principals and vice-principals. I am also conscious of the Public Accounts Committee's concern that the system of pay flexibilities for principals and vice-principals must work equitably.

As such, the employing authorities and my Department have been drawing up detailed guidance for Boards of Governors on the pay arrangements for principals and vice-principals, which will issue very shortly.

Report of the Post-Primary Review Body

Ms Gildernew asked the Minister of Education to explain his decision to extend the consultation period on the Report of the Post-Primary Review Body. (AQO 816/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I have extended the consultation period to 28 June 2002 to allow sufficient time for a full, open and informed debate about the issues, including the key issue of academic selection. This Review is about putting in place arrangements which will address the weaknesses of the current system, raise standards and best meet the needs of all children. By extending the consultation period I have provided additional time for everyone to comment on the proposals contained in the Review Body's Report, suggest modifications to the Burns proposals or suggest alternative arrangements.

Magherafelt High School: Accommodation Needs

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Education what funds have been made available to facilitate the removal of mobile classrooms at Magherafelt High School and to upgrade the school generally. (AQO 775/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The North Eastern Education and Library Board will be commencing work shortly on an economic appraisal to determine the most cost effective means of addressing the accommodation needs at the school. When this has been completed and planning is sufficiently advanced, the project will be considered for a place in the capital programme in light of the resources available.

Irish Language in English-Medium Schools

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education to encourage and facilitate the teaching of the Irish language in English-medium schools; and to make a statement. (AQO 767/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I believe that the Irish language is an important element in the cultural heritage of all the people of Ireland, and I would encourage as many

schools as possible in all sectors to offer pupils the opportunity to learn the language. It is, however, a matter for schools themselves to determine the curriculum they offer to pupils, subject to meeting their statutory obligations. The study of Irish is compulsory only in those schools which teach through the medium of Irish.

Edexcel

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Education to detail the effect the recent exam mistakes by Edexcel, in particular those concerning the Decision Maths AS level paper and the Religious Studies exam last summer, has had on Northern Ireland students and to indicate the number of students involved. (AQO 787/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is estimated that difficulties resulting from Edexcel's administration of last year's AS Mathematics and AS Religious Studies examination papers impacted on some 200 students in Northern Ireland. CCEA, in its regulatory capacity, has sought to expedite the resolution of issues relating to Edexcel examinations on behalf of local schools and colleges.

Rationalisation of Local Primary Schools

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education how many feasibility studies are necessary to carry out the rationalisation of local primary schools. (AQO 777/01)

Mr M McGuinness: A single feasibility study is normally sufficient in rationalisation schemes which involve capital expenditure. Such a study is unnecessary for schemes where there are no capital expenditure implications.

Sick Pay and Statutory Sick Pay

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of teacher sickness in each Education Board in the years 1998-99, 1999-2000 and 2000-01; and to make a statement. (AQO 793/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The costs of Sick Pay and Statutory Sick Pay for each Education Board in the years 1998-99 to 2000-01 were as follows.

	1998-99 £(k)	1999-2000 £(k)	2000-2001 £(k)
BELB	2,489	2,462	2,648
WELB	2,799	2,980	3,167
NEELB	2,538	2,824	3,206
SEELB	2,329	2,475	2,492
SELB	3,495	3,394	3,818

Education Other Than in School

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Education how many children, in each Board area, are receiving part-time and full-time education other than at school; and to make a statement. (AQO 819/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Information provided at 5 October 2001 by the Boards shows that the number of children receiving educational provision other than in school was as follows:

BELB	135
SEELB	161
SELB	144
NEELB	77
WELB	132

Information is not available about the part-time or full-time nature of the provision and the figures do not cover all children as some are in community based projects which may or may not be in receipt of funding through the Boards.

Equality and Human Rights

Mr McNamee asked the Minister of Education how he is promoting equality and human rights, and specifically what work has been undertaken with the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission. (AQO 818/01)

Mr M McGuinness: As Minister for Education I am fully committed to the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement of which equality and human rights are key tenets.

As part of this work my Department has developed excellent working relationships with both the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission. My Department last year co-hosted two major Conferences, one with the Human Rights Commission which dealt with Human Rights in Education and one with the Equality Commission on Racial Equality in Education.

I launched the Conference Report on the Human Rights in Education Conference on 30 January 2002 and the Racial Equality in Education Conference Report is due to be launched later this month.

Flowing from both Conferences are a series of recommendations which will ensure that this work is taken forward at all levels within the Education sector.

My Department will continue to work closely with both the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission in taking the respective Conference Report recommendations forward.

New Opportunities for PE and Sport Programme

Mr Close asked the Minister of Education what resources his Department will make available to allow schools to avail of the New Opportunities Fund programme for PE and Sport in schools. (AQO 782/01)

Mr M McGuinness: A total of £33.75 million is being made available under the New Opportunities for PE and Sport Programme in Northern Ireland to:

- build new and refurbish existing sports facilities for school and community use;
- support the development and promotion of these facilities for community use; and
- build or refurbish outdoor adventure facilities.

The funding will be split between five area partnerships, headed up by the Education and Library Boards, who will facilitate schools in developing their projects for consideration by the New Opportunities Fund.

Pre-School Places: Downshire and Killultagh District

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of fully funded pre-school nursery places available in the Downshire and Killultagh District electoral areas of Lisburn Borough Council; and (b) where they are located. (AQO 791/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In the Downshire and Killultagh District electoral areas funded pre-school places are available as follows:

Legacurry Playgroup	14
Annahilt Pre-School Playgroup	18
Dromara Playgroup	26
Total	58

KILLULTAGH DISTRICT

Sunshine Playgroup, Ballinderry	10
Ballymacrickett Primary School	26
Ballymacward Pre-School Playgroup	15
McKinney Primary School	26
Poppins Day Nursery, Maghaberry	16
Rainbow Corner Playgroup, Moira	10
Total	103*

In addition, a scheme for the establishment of a nursery unit offering 26 part-time places in Maghaberry Primary School is currently in planning.

Possession of Offensive Weapons

Mr Davis asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to amend the guidance to schools regarding the

expulsion of pupils caught in possession of offensive weapons. (AQO 786/01)

Mr M McGuinness: There are no plans to issue guidance to schools about the management of pupils caught in possession of offensive weapons. Schools are responsible for their own discipline policies and within these to determine the sanctions which will be applied in respect of any breaches.

The current arrangements around suspensions and expulsions are due to be reviewed during 2002-03. At that time the need for any supplementary guidance in this area will be considered.

Burns Report

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 789/01, to detail the membership and remit of the Committee he has announced to be established by end February 2002 to deal with matters related to the Burns Report, prior to the end of the public consultation process related to that report. (AQW 2041/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The remit of the groups will be to consider the issues which arise out of the consultations on the report and they will comprise relevant officials from within my Department. The groups will not have formal terms of reference nor, as I said in my reply of 21 January, are there any plans at present to involve external advisers.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Student Drop-Out

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students have dropped out of (a) further; and (b) higher education institutions in each of the last five years. (AQW 1195/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): The information in Further Education (FE) Institutions is not available. However, the Department collects information relating to the number of final year students who do not sit their examinations, as a proportion of all final year enrolments. This data provides a measurement of drop-out and the statistics are backed up by the Education and Training Inspectorate, who surveyed a broad range of vocational courses in seven NI Further Education Institutions in 1998-99 and 1999-2000. This survey states that the average drop out rate was 27% for full-time courses and 29% for part-time courses inspected. This figure is calculated as the overall average drop-out rate for the three years prior to the focused inspection.

FURTHER EDUCATION LEAVERS AND THE PERCENTAGE WHO DID NOT SIT EXAMINATIONS (AS A PROXY FOR DROP OUT)

	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00
Final year enrolments across 17 NI FE Institutions	65,114	68,657	75,758	77,976	85,656
% of students who did not sit examination	34%	31%	33%	32%	37%

Source: Further Education Leavers Survey

The above figures relate to vocational and academic enrolments only

* The increase in the % of students on vocational courses who did not sit their examinations should be viewed against the background of widening access initiatives which have increased participation but in doing so have lowered completion rates.

Institution	Number of starters	Neither award nor transfer	
		Projected %	Benchmark %
1996/97			
Queens University Belfast	3,044	10	12
University of Ulster	2,221	17	18
1997/98			
Queens University Belfast	2,985	10	9
University of Ulster	2,793	12	16
1998/99			
Queens University Belfast*	3,230		
University of Ulster	3,257	13	18

* Two colleges of Queen's University, (St Mary's and Stranmillis) now submit data on their own behalf. This has had implications for the projected outcomes of the institution, which show a large proportion expected to transfer to other HEI's, and a consequent decrease in the proportion projected to obtain a degree. As these results are misleading, HEFCE have omitted the figures for this institution from the table.

Promoting Courses at Further Education Colleges

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps are being taken to promote the merits of courses at further education colleges.

(AQW 1701/01)

Ms Hanna: The marketing and promotional activities of further education (FE) colleges are the responsibility of individual colleges. In addition to college prospectuses, colleges also employ a range of marketing initiatives to promote their services to prospective learners. Further independent information is available from a range of sources including the Careers Service, the

Educational Guidance Service for Adults and learndirect. In addition my Department has established a Marketing Working Group to look at the wider issues surrounding the marketing of the FE sector.

Undergraduates from Republic of Ireland Enrolled at University Campuses

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what are the most recent figures for the number of undergraduates from the Republic of Ireland enrolled at each of the university campuses in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1710/01)

Ms Hanna: The table below sets out information on the number of undergraduates from the Republic of Ireland enrolled at each of the university campuses in Northern Ireland. These figures relate to the 2000/01 academic year.

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND DOMICILED UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS ENROLLING ON HIGHER EDUCATION COURSES AT NORTHERN IRELAND INSTITUTIONS BY MODE OF STUDY AND CAMPUS, 2000/01

	Full-time & Campus Sandwich Part-time Total
The Queen's University of Belfast	495 394 889
Stranmillis University College	15 3 18
St. Mary's University College	50 0 50
University of Ulster	Belfast 76 1 77
	Coleraine 438 11 449
	Jordanstown 307 54 361
	Magee 292 95 387
Total UU	1,113 161 1,274
Total of all Universities	1,673 558 2,231

Source: HESA Dataset

Work Permits

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what safeguards exist, when issuing foreign nationals outside the EU with work permits, to ensure that the minimum wage criteria is met.

(AQW 1738/01)

Ms Hanna: Employers applying for work permits are required to state, among other things, the amount they guarantee to pay the employee before deductions. A permit is not issued if it appears that the employer proposes to pay less than the National Minimum Wage or less than the rate normally paid to a European Economic Area resident worker. The amount of pay stated by the employer is reproduced on the work permit.

Governing Bodies of Institutes of Further Education

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she intends to bring forward proposals to increase transparency and public accountability in respect of membership of the governing bodies of Institutes of Further and Higher Education; and to make a statement. (AQW 1757/01)

Ms Hanna: The governing bodies of Institutes of Further Education will be reconstituted on 1 April 2002. My Department has already indicated the intention to review the arrangements for governance in 2003-04.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) her plans for the Review of Public Administration within her Department; (b) the timescale involved; and to make a statement. (AQW 1758/01)

Ms Hanna: The Review of Public Administration is currently under consideration by the Executive.

Governing Bodies

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she has any plans to establish an independent forum/panel, with powers of investigation and remedy, to oversee complaints against governing bodies of Further and Higher Education Institutes in respect of issues of employment and equality; and to make a statement. (AQW 1759/01)

Ms Hanna: The issues raised are matters for the governing bodies of the Colleges of Further Education in conjunction with the appropriate statutory authorities for employment and equality.

Student Loans

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures she is taking to provide for student debt so that the total funds reserved for student loans could be reduced; and to make a statement. (AQW 1840/01)

Ms Hanna: While student loans offer students a method of funding their living costs, with very favourable repayment terms, I recognise that some students experience financial difficulties. With this in mind, my Department is introducing means-tested non-repayable higher education bursaries of up to £1,500 per year from 2002-03. This will reduce the amount of loans students will claim and ultimately reduce the Department's loans budget.

Bombardier Shorts: Financial Assistance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much financial assistance has been provided to Bombardier Shorts for training or other associated activities in each year since 1989. (AQW 1842/01)

Ms Hanna: Details of financial assistance provided to Bombardier Shorts are only available from the 1997-98 period. The total assistance provided by my Department in each of the years from 1997-98 was:

	£
1997/98	662,310
1998/99	94,190
1999/00	921,070
2000/01	578,800
2001/02	488,960

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Unemployment Rate: East Antrim

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, by electoral ward, the unemployment rate for the parliamentary constituency of East Antrim. (AQW 1628/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): [holding answer 8 February 2002]: Ward-based information on employment is confined to claimant count numbers.

Details of the number of claimant count unemployment for each ward in East Antrim parliamentary constituency area can be found in Table 1 overleaf. Also provided (Table 2) is an unemployment rate for East Antrim parliamentary constituency area as a whole compared to Northern Ireland.

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF CLAIMANT COUNT UNEMPLOYED IN EAST ANTRIM PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA BY ELECTORAL WARD AT DECEMBER 2001.

District Council	Ward	Male	Female	Total
Carrickfergus	Blackhead	28	7	35
Carrickfergus	Boneybefore	23	6	29
Carrickfergus	Clipperstown	32	11	43
Carrickfergus	Eden	34	12	46
Carrickfergus	Gortalee	35	5	40
Carrickfergus	Greenisland	30	9	39
Carrickfergus	Killycrot	48	20	68
Carrickfergus	Knockagh	21	3	24

District Council	Ward	Male	Female	Total
Carrickfergus	Love Lane	49	12	61
Carrickfergus	Milebush	27	11	38
Carrickfergus	Northland	40	12	52
Carrickfergus	Sunnylands	42	10	52
Carrickfergus	Victoria	20	8	28
Carrickfergus	Whitehead	21	6	27
Carrickfergus	Woodburn	51	27	78
Larne	Antiville	30	10	40
Larne	Ballycarry	27	8	35
Larne	Ballyloran	47	19	66
Larne	Blackcave	23	12	35
Larne	Carncastle	15	8	23
Larne	Carnlough	29	11	40
Larne	Central	65	31	96
Larne	Craig Hill	38	19	57
Larne	Gardenmore	31	13	44
Larne	Glenarm	28	10	38
Larne	Glynn	14	11	25
Larne	Harbour	29	4	33
Larne	Island Magee	24	8	32
Larne	Kilwaughter	25	9	34
Larne	Town Parks	34	7	41
Newtownabbey	Abbey	26	4	30
Newtownabbey	Braden	61	10	71
Newtownabbey	Cloughfern	38	14	52
Newtownabbey	Coole	57	14	71
Newtownabbey	Dunanney	54	13	67
Newtownabbey	Jordanstown	25	9	34
Newtownabbey	Monkstown	70	18	88
Newtownabbey	Rostulla	31	10	41
Newtownabbey	Valley	57	16	73
Newtownabbey	Whitehouse	34	9	43
Total - East Antrim PCA		1,413	456	1,869

TABLE 2
NUMBER AND RATE OF CLAIMANT COUNT UNEMPLOYED
IN EAST ANTRIM PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY
AREA AND NORTHERN IRELAND AT DECEMBER 2001.

	Number			% of workforce		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
East Antrim	1,413	456	1,869	7.1	2.9	5.2
Northern Ireland	28,300	8,287	36,587	6.4	2.4	4.6

'Employment in Europe 2001'

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of (a) the 'Employment in Europe 2001 — Autumn Update' document; and (b) the employment implications therein relevant to Northern Ireland. (AQW 1714/01)

Sir Reg Empey:

- (a) 'Employment in Europe' is one of many useful publications commenting on the employment challenges facing all national and regional economies given the current global economic climate.
- (b) While the publication is concerned with employment prospects at a European and national level, it does confirm my view that Northern Ireland is not immune from the effects of a slowdown in the world economy. The document identifies several sectors that are important to Northern Ireland's future employment prospects and which are vulnerable given the current global economic climate. The sectors of the Northern Ireland economy that are most vulnerable are aerospace, tourism and Information/Communication Technology (ICT). Future employment prospects in these areas will be largely dependent upon a global economic recovery and the restoration of confidence in the airline industry.

Employment Trends

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will make a statement on employment trends since September 2001. (AQW 1721/01)

Sir Reg Empey: As the latest available employment estimates relate to September 2001, I am not in a position to discuss trends since that date. However, for information the September 2001 Quarterly Employment Survey (QES) estimated that there were 643,620 employee jobs in Northern Ireland. This represents a decrease of 300 from the previous quarter (June 2001) and an increase of 4,520 over the year. Employment estimates for December 2001 are due to be published on 20 March 2002.

Work-Related Accidents

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many accidents at work led to (i) major; and (ii) minor injuries in each of the last three years. (AQW 1735/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The number of accidents reported to enforcing authorities under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997 during the last three financial years is set out in the following table.

Year	Specified major injuries	Other injuries resulting in more than 3 days absence from work
2000/2001	644	3832
1999/2000	605	3843
1998/1999	613	3425

Fatal Accidents

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many deaths were recorded at work for each of the last three years.

(AQW 1736/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The number of fatal accidents reported to enforcing authorities under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (Northern Ireland) during the last three financial years is as follows:

2000/2001	16
1999/2000	19
1998/1999	24

National Minimum Wage: Ballylumford Power Station

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 965/01, to detail the process to ensure that foreign nationals from within the EU currently working at Ballylumford Power Station, are able to avail of the national minimum wage.

(AQW 1760/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Inland Revenue enforces the national minimum wage provisions on behalf of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). Foreign workers are entitled to the national minimum wage in exactly the same way as other workers. The Inland Revenue has a specialist team based in Belfast who are responsible for enforcing the national minimum wage in Northern Ireland. The team follow up complaints by workers and will also respond to tip-offs from other interested parties. If someone suspects non-compliance with the minimum wage in Northern Ireland, then in the first instance, they should contact the Northern Ireland minimum wage helpline on 0845 6500 207.

National Minimum Wage

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many people are benefiting from the recent uprating of the national minimum wage.

(AQW 1763/01)

Sir Reg Empey: There is no standard method of calculating the number of people directly affected by the National Minimum Wage in Northern Ireland. Estimates relating to the percentage of employees

earning less than the National Minimum Wages are available from the NI New Earnings Survey which is carried out each April. The latest results available refer to April 2001, when the national minimum wage rates were £3.70 per hour for those aged 22 and over and £3.20 per hour for 18- to 21-year olds. This suggests that 0.8% of employees were earning less than the National Minimum Wages. There is no data available as yet covering the uplift in October 2001 to £4.10 and £3.50 respectively.

Agriculture Industry

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of non-UK and non-Republic of Ireland citizens who are registered as working in the agricultural industry in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1778/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The only potential source of the information requested is the Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey (LFS). However, this is a sample survey and estimates disaggregated to the level required are not sufficiently reliable and are not published.

Job Losses: Coats Viyella, Randalstown

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action he is taking in conjunction with the Industrial Development Board following the loss of 200 jobs at the Dorma factory in Randalstown announced on 11 February.

(AQW 2040/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Officials in the Industrial Development Board (IDB) have been in close contact with senior Coats Viyella management and members of the Management buyout team since the company made its first announcement that 70% of the factory's capacity was no longer required by customers.

When IDB was informed of the final decision to close, the Chief Executive spoke to a member of the Coats Viyella senior management team to once more encourage Coats Viyella to reconsider the options for the future.

IDB is continuing to work with the employment services of the Training and Employment Agency and Coats Viyella management to obtain an orderly run down of production and will be responding to any expressions of interest in the business from other parties to secure the best possible outcome for those affected.

IDB has also offered to help promote the factory and surrounding site to bring it to the attention of other businesses by placing it on IDB's Property Services web site.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Disposal of Fridges and Freezers

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to make it his policy to fund the total cost incurred in the disposal of fridges and freezers under EC Regulation 2037-2000. (AQW 1744/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): Work is continuing to identify the total cost associated with the introduction of EC Regulation 2037 / 2000. The cost of both storage and disposal is dependent on the number of waste units involved and on the availability and location of approved disposal plants.

My officials are working with district council staff on volume and are in touch with the industry and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about plans to establish disposal plants. I expect matters to become clearer over the coming months

In the meantime, I am aware that there are operational and cost implications for councils. No specific additional resources have currently been earmarked for this work in the DOE budgets for this year or next. However, I will do all that I can to secure some financial assistance for councils, bidding to the Department of Finance and Personnel as necessary and taking account of the levels of assistance being made available to councils in GB.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to extend the timescale for public consultation on the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan. (AQW 1745/01)

Mr Foster: The Planning (Development Plans) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1994 allows 14 weeks for the receipt of representations in relation to development plans and this position applies to the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan Issues Paper. The Department has arranged 37 public meetings throughout the Plan area during this 14-week period to ensure everyone has the opportunity to express their views and influence the Plan preparation process.

The Department has no plans to extend the timescale for public consultation; however, consultation with the six Councils will continue throughout the Plan-making process.

Delivery of Local Services

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline plans he has to improve the efficiency of services offered by local district councils; and to make a statement. (AQW 1750/01)

Mr Foster: A Local Government (Best Value) Bill has completed Further Consideration Stage in the Northern Ireland Assembly. This Bill makes provision, placing a general duty on district councils to achieve best value in their delivery of local services, in consultation with local people.

The general duty will require councils to seek improvements in the way their functions are undertaken, having regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

It is anticipated that legislation will become effective from 1 April 2002.

Disposal of Fridges and Freezers

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) when he became aware of EC Regulation 2037/2000, regarding the disposal of fridges and freezers; (b) why no consultation has been carried out with local council authorities; and (c) why funding has not yet been provided to local council authorities to take account of the resulting financial burden. (AQW 1769/01)

Mr Foster:

- (a) The EC decision to include domestic fridges and freezers within EC Regulation 2037/2000 was circulated in the summer of 2001.
- (b) It is not right to suggest that there has been no consultation with local councils. In the first instance, my officials were in communication with councils by telephone and e-mail. Attempts were made in early December 2001 to arrange meetings with both council representatives and their Technical Advisory Group. However, this did not prove possible until recently when officials attended a meeting with council chief executives and gave a presentation on the background to the EC Regulation and on the current position. This meeting followed the issue of draft guidance on storage of waste refrigeration equipment which was passed to councils for comment on 10 January. A further meeting has taken place with the councils' Technical Advisory Group on 13 February to provide an opportunity to discuss issues relating to both storage and disposal of waste units and to exchange information on the impact of the Regulation since 1 January. Those councils who had written to the Department about the Regulations have received responses and an update on the position.
- (c) Limited information on the predicted numbers of waste fridges and freezers and on the likely availability and location of approved disposal plants, makes it impossible at this stage to finalise any robust figures for the cost of storage or disposal. I am, however, aware that there are operational and

cost implications for councils. No specific additional resources have currently been earmarked for this work in the DOE budgets for this year or the next. However, I will do all that I can to secure some financial assistance for councils, bidding to DFP as necessary and taking account of the levels of assistance being made available to councils in GB.

Noise Act 1996

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment he has made in relation to the application of the Noise Act 1996, by local district councils, in dealing with noise nuisance.

(AQW 1771/01)

Mr Foster: No formal assessment of the operation of the Noise Act 1996 in Northern Ireland has been undertaken and there are no immediate plans to do so.

This is a discretionary Act that applies to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It provides additional powers to district councils to abate neighbour noise nuisance during night-time hours. Before taking effect in any area, the Act must be adopted by the district council. To date only Belfast City Council has adopted the Act. I understand that the majority of district councils consider the level of service required under the Act to be too onerous and costly when compared with their assessment of the benefit which the additional powers provide. There is, of course, existing mandatory legislation which provides control over noise nuisance, including that occurring during night-time hours.

A recent assessment in England and Wales highlighted similar problems with the operation of the Act and the options for addressing the matter are presently being assessed. Before I consider what action my Department should be taking, I would wish to await the outcome of the review in England and Wales. In the meantime, my officials are liaising closely with their English and Welsh counterparts about the implications of any proposed changes for Northern Ireland.

Telecommunication Mast (Annareagh Road, Hamiltonsbawn)

Mr Berry asked the Minister of the Environment if planning permission was granted for the erection of telecommunication masts on the Annareagh Road, Hamiltonsbawn, Co Armagh.

(AQW 1796/01)

Mr Foster: My Department granted "prior approval" for the erection of a telecommunications mast on land adjacent to 31 Main Street, Hamiltonsbawn, with access by means of a laneway to Annareagh Road, Hamiltonsbawn, on 28 December 2001.

Planning Legislation: Telecommunication Masts

Mr Berry asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to introduce (a) legislation for increased control of development by licensed telecommunications code systems operators; and (b) a draft planning policy statement on telecommunications development.

(AQW 1797/01)

Mr Foster: My Department issued a consultation paper on 10 November 2000, seeking views on possible changes to planning legislation for the control of development by licensed telecommunications code system operators, and on the terms of a draft Planning Policy Statement on telecommunications development.

Following a decision of the Executive Committee, my Department is currently preparing legislation, which will require full planning permission for all new telecommunications development. All such development, including new telecommunications masts, will then be subject to the full rigour of the planning process. At the same time my Department is finalising the draft Planning Policy Statement on telecommunications.

I anticipate that the revised planning Regulations will be brought forward in late February or March 2002 and these are expected to take effect in April 2002. I will publish the revised Planning Policy Statement on telecommunications at the same time as introducing the new legislation.

Planning Service: Consultancy Costs

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) how much has been spent on consultancy by the Planning Service in this financial year; (b) the breakdown per constituency; and (c) the type of consultancy.

(AQW 1824/01)

Mr Foster: The Planning Service has spent £660,741 on consultancy in the current financial year up to 31 January 2002.

It is not practicable to break this down by constituency. Certain consultancy work has no specific geographic focus, while other work that does have such a focus, crosses constituency boundaries.

The types of consultancy to date fall into the following categories:

- Development Plan consultation;
- Development Plan related research;
- Provision of professional planning support to Development Plan teams;
- Advice on landscape issues;
- IT Procurement support;
- IT Technical support;

- Specialist advice/surveys relating to Tree Preservation Orders;
 - Specialist advice relating to Conservation Areas;
 - Evaluation of Community Technical Aid;
 - Development-Control-related research;
 - Accountancy support;
 - Management Development;
 - Policy Evaluation;
 - Legal services.
- Sprucefield Shopping Centre, Lisburn
 - Tower Centre, Ballymena
 - Northcott Shopping Centre, Glengormley
 - Buttercrane Shopping Centre, Newry
 - Meadows Shopping Centre, Portadown
 - Bloomfield Shopping Centre, Bangor and
 - Meadow Lane Shopping Centre, Magherafelt.

Taxi Industry

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) any measures he is taking to prevent the increase of unlicensed taxis; and (b) any sanctions that are implemented against firms that use unlicensed drivers. (AQW 1827/01)

Mr Foster:

- (a) I was able to secure an additional funding in 2000-01 and the current year for increased roadside checks and enforcement activity by my Department's enforcement staff. As a result, it was possible to double the number of roadside checks of taxis in both years from 900 to 1,800.

I have also consulted the taxi industry on proposals to increase the Public Service Vehicle licence fee for taxis to fund additional enforcement activity from 2002-03 onwards. My officials are currently considering the responses to the consultation and I expect to receive advice and recommendations shortly.

- (b) My Department has no legislative authority to regulate taxi firms. Its statutory powers extend only to taxi drivers and their vehicles.

I do recognise, however, that there is concern about the regulation of the taxi industry. I see merit in undertaking a review of the regulatory regime and I will take this forward as soon as resources allow.

Wake up to Waste Roadshow

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) if the Wake up to Waste Roadshow will be available in all district council areas and (b) if a redesigned modular version will be available to district councils at no charge. (AQW 1886/01)

Mr Foster: The Wake up to Waste Roadshow will be available in the following locations:

- Foyleside Shopping Centre, Londonderry
- Castlecourt Shopping Centre, Belfast
- Forestside Shopping Centre, Castlereagh
- Erneside Shopping Centre, Enniskillen

The Roadshow has been designed and directed by a local firm of PR consultants. Their advice is that these locations offer the best possible access for the greatest number of people. The choice is based solely on actual visitor figures to these locations.

A redesigned modular version of the Roadshow is not currently available. My Department is funding directly only the presentations listed above, on the basis that this represents best value for money. If district councils identify additional needs, it is open to them to use funds from their allocations under the Waste Management Grant Scheme 2001-02 to meet the costs.

Additional local publicity, in the form of graphic display material for each council, is currently being considered by my Department.

Transfer List

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 1523/01, to detail the average length of time full-time employees have been waiting on the transfer list. (AQW 1887/01)

Mr Foster: My Department does not maintain details of the average time staff working in DOE have been waiting on the transfer list. My response to AQW 1523/01 stated that the number of full-time employees in the Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency currently seeking a transfer to another Department is 29. The average length of time that these employees have been waiting on the list is three years.

Safety Cameras

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the current number of traffic speed cameras; and (b) the number he plans to install. (AQW 1910/01)

Mr Foster: Responsibility for operational policy on safety cameras (or speed cameras as they used to be known) including the number and location of these cameras are matters for the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The Police Service of Northern Ireland has advised that it has five mobile safety cameras, which are focused on those roads where there is a high instance of speed-related incidents to maximise potential for road traffic casualty reduction.

However, my Department is currently in discussion with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service and other Departments and agencies in Northern Ireland, on how best the lessons from the pilot Safety Camera Netting-off Schemes in Great Britain can be applied in Northern Ireland. To assist in the development of the business case for introducing a netting-off scheme in Northern Ireland, we have appointed consultants with experience of the scheme in Great Britain.

The pilot schemes in Great Britain were to assess potential new arrangements for using part of the fine income from speed and red light cameras to fund the installation and operation of additional cameras. The results from the pilot schemes have been very encouraging in terms of reducing both vehicle speeds and collision casualties in the pilot areas.

Excessive speed remains a major cause of road collisions in Northern Ireland. During the year 2000, 44 of the 171 road traffic collision deaths in Northern Ireland were due to excessive speed. While a detailed analysis for 2001 is not yet available, early indications are that speed was again a major factor in many of the 148 deaths. Approximately one in ten of all collisions, and one in five of collisions involving death or serious injury is due to speeding.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Senior Civil Servants' Posts

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, by Department, the number of senior civil servants' posts since December 1999.
(AQW 1681/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): For convenience the information requested is summarised in the tables below.

SENIOR CIVIL SERVICE POSTS BY DEPARTMENT

Department	2000	2001	2002
DARD	23	23	23
DCAL	6	6	6
DE	15	14	15
DEL	8	8	10
DETI	27	27	27
DFP	34	38	34
DHSSPS	31	30	35
DOE	15	14	15
DRD	19	19	21

Department	2000	2001	2002
DSD	18	17	15
OFMDFM	10	18	23
Total	206	214	224

SENIOR CIVIL SERVICE POSTS 1998-2002

1997	209
1998	204
1999	197
2000	206
2001	214
2002	224

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of senior civil servants' posts in the Northern Ireland Civil Service for each of the last five years.
(AQW 1682/01)

Dr Farren: For convenience the information requested is summarised in the tables below.

SENIOR CIVIL SERVICE POSTS BY DEPARTMENT

Department	2000	2001	2002
DARD	23	23	23
DCAL	6	6	6
DE	15	14	15
DEL	8	8	10
DETI	27	27	27
DFP	34	38	34
DHSSPS	31	30	35
DOE	15	14	15
DRD	19	19	21
DSD	18	17	15
OFMDFM	10	18	23
Total	206	214	224

SENIOR CIVIL SERVICE POSTS 1998-2002

1997	209
1998	204
1999	197
2000	206
2001	214
2002	224

Barnett Formula

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he last discussed the future of the Barnett formula with HM Treasury Ministers.
(AQW 1723/01)

Dr Farren: The Executive have made clear our dissatisfaction with the Barnett formula as the key mechanism for funding the devolved Administration. At present we are examining through the Needs and Effectiveness Evaluations (NEE) the evidence on the need for expenditure on public services comparable to those in England. Greater clarity is needed on that issue before a decision can be taken on the approach to negotiations with the Treasury on Barnett in Spending Review 2002.

Local Strategy Partnerships: Gender Balance

Ms Morrice asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give a detailed breakdown of the gender balance in local district partnership boards; and to make a statement. (AQW 1730/01)

Dr Farren: A total of 627 members are currently serving on the Local Strategy Partnerships of which 68% are male and 32% are female. Participation on the Local Strategy Partnerships is made on the basis of an equal partnership between two strands:

- Local Government and the main Statutory Agencies operating at local level; and
- the four pillars of Social Partners: private sector, community sector, voluntary sector and agriculture and rural development sector.

The table below provides a detailed breakdown of the new Local Strategy Partnerships.

Council Area	Local Strategy Partnership	
	Male	Female
Antrim	18	5
Ards	13	9
Armagh	18	9
Ballymena	18	6
Ballymoney	15	5
Banbridge	19	7
Belfast	18	10
Carrickfergus	13	7
Castlereagh	18	10
Coleraine	10	8
Cookstown	13	5
Craigavon	10	6
Derry City	18	10
Down	17	9
Fermanagh	17	11
Larne	16	9
Limavady	22	6

Council Area	Local Strategy Partnership	
	Male	Female
Lisburn	19	9
Magherafelt	14	6
Moyle	12	12
Newry	20	8
Newtownabbey	15	9
North Down	16	6
Omagh	19	7
South Tyrone	15	7
Strabane	23	5
Totals	426	201
% of Total	68%	32%

Derating: Orange Halls

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the representations he has received regarding the derating of Orange Halls. (AQW 1755/01)

Dr Farren: In addition to this Question, I have received an Assembly Written Question from the Member for Strangford as well as a letter from the Grand Secretary to the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland about general derating for Orange Halls. I have also received a letter from an individual Belfast Orange Lodge about the rates levied on a particular hall.

In addition, from the commencement of the first period of devolution, my predecessor as Minister of Finance and Personnel, answered four Oral Assembly Questions on this topic. He also replied to a total of eight letters, mostly from MLAs and individual Orange Lodges.

Deprived Areas: South Down

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the most deprived areas in South Down in relation to figures recently released by NISRA; and to make a statement. (AQW 1756/01)

Dr Farren: The 12 most deprived electoral wards in the South Down constituency are given in the table below, ranked according to their multiple deprivation score.

Local Government District ¹	Electoral ward ¹	Multiple deprivation score	Ward ranking within Northern Ireland ²
Down	Flying Horse	54.52	25
Down	Cathedral	30.71	131

Local Government District ¹	Electoral ward ¹	Multiple deprivation score	Ward ranking within Northern Ireland ²
Newry and Mourne	Spelga	28.43	149
Down	Murlough	27.93	155
Newry and Mourne	Rathfriland	25.50	179
Newry and Mourne	Kilkeel South	24.66	194
Down	Castlewellan	24.43	196
Down	Ardglass	23.83	206
Newry and Mourne	Clonallan	23.74	209
Newry and Mourne	Kilkeel Central	22.79	221
Newry and Mourne	Lisnascree	22.74	222
Down	Dundrum	21.01	244

Notes to table:

¹ These refer to the set of Local Government District and Electoral Ward boundaries published in 1984 and by which the 1991 Census was reported.

² These refer to a ranking of the 566 wards in Northern Ireland, using the Multiple Deprivation Measure, where a rank of 1 is given to the most deprived ward.

The scores are taken from the research report 'The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure' published in 2001 by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, and which lists deprivation scores and rankings for all wards in Northern Ireland.

Underspend Within the UK NHS

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if any of the £700 million underspend in the NHS in the UK will be channelled to the Health Service in Northern Ireland, to address waiting lists and Health Service pressures. (AQO 821/01)

Dr Farren: Underspends within the UK NHS are an issue for the relevant GB Department in the same way that underspends within programmes here are retained in Northern Ireland and reallocated at the discretion of the Executive. The calculation of Barnett consequential for Northern Ireland is determined by reference to planned spending in England, and thus our entitlement is not influenced by subsequent underspends there.

Civil Service Jobs

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made to decentralise Civil Service jobs to West Tyrone. (AQO 779/01)

Dr Farren: Until the conclusion of the strategic review of Civil Service office accommodation, which includes an examination of the scope for decentralisation of Civil Service jobs, it would be wrong to prejudge the outcome or to speculate as to the locations which might be involved in any subsequent dispersal of Civil Service jobs.

Physical Punishment in the Home: Consultation

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the timetable for follow-up to the consultation on 'Physical Punishment in the Home — Thinking about the Issues, Looking at the Evidence'. (AQO 765/01)

Dr Farren: The consultation period ended on 31st January 2002. Officials shall now undertake an analysis of the responses received from the consultation. It is difficult to predict at this early stage how long this process will take, as there has been a substantial response to this consultation, but the work is being given priority within my Department.

Peace Dividend

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he has lobbied the Chancellor of the Exchequer to maximise finances accruing from the Peace Dividend. (AQO 822/01)

Dr Farren: I have not made any direct approaches to the Treasury on this specific issue, but the Executive are committed to ensuring we receive a fair share of UK public expenditure, based on an objective assessment of our needs. To this end, we are conducting a careful analysis which will take account of all relevant considerations. In due course we will conclude on how and when any issues should best be raised with the Treasury.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Royal Victoria Hospital General Fund

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm (a) the current position and purpose of the Royal Victoria

Hospital Endowment Fund; and (b) that the fund will finance research fellowships. (AQW 1243/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): [supplementary answer]: It has come to my attention that, due to a typographical error, the response to AQW 1243/01 was incorrect.

The correct balance of the Royal Victoria Hospital General Fund is £193,204 and not £1,932,047 as previously stated.

I am sorry for any confusion this may have caused.

Reviews/Consultations

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of public consultations and reviews she has initiated; and (b) how many of these are currently running. (AQW 1489/01)

Ms de Brún: Since I took office, I have initiated 10 public consultations and six major reviews. A review of Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Teams has also been taken forward by the Drug and Alcohol Ministerial Strategic Steering Group which I chair. Of these, some five are ongoing.

Ó ghlac mé leis an phost, thionscnaigh mé 10 comhairliú poiblí agus 6 athbhreithniú mór. Tá athbhreithniú ar Fhoirne Comhordaithe Drúgaí agus Alcóil tugtha chun tosaigh ag an Ghrúpa Stiúrtha Straitéisigh Aireachta Drúgaí agus Alcóil a bhfuil mé féin mar chathaoirleach air. Acu siúd, tá cúigear éigin ag dul ar aghaidh faoi láthair.

Reviews/Consultations: Cost

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of the public consultations and reviews she has initiated since taking office. (AQW 1490/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is as follows:

Review/Consultation	Cost To Date (Dec. 2001)
Acute Hospitals Review Group	£571,898
Cardiac Surgery Review	*
Review of Human Tissue Act (NI) 1962	Nil
Review of the Mental Health Commission	£34,721
Review of Intensive Care Services	*
Review of Community Care Services	£55,500
Capitation Formula – Consultation on New Approach	£756 (excl. printing & advertising costs)
Ambulance Service Implementation Plan (Consultation)	Nil

Review/Consultation	Cost To Date (Dec. 2001)
Centralisation of Belfast Maternity Services (Consultation)	£3,995 (Printing)
Best Practice, Best Care (Consultation)	£27,219 (Printing)
Building the Way Forward in Primary Care (Consultation)	£53,490
Consultation on Fortification of Flour with Folic Acid to Prevent Neural tube Defects	Nil
Equality Implications of Health, Social Services and Public Safety Policies (2-Stage Consultation)	£39,600
Minding Our Health – A Draft Strategy for Promoting Mental and Emotional Health (Consultation)	£1,000
'Myths and Reality' – Report of the Working Group on Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood (Consultation)	£6,000
'Review of Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Teams	£25,483
Investing For Health Consultation	£147,375

* Costs not readily available.

¹ Taken forward by the Drug and Alcohol Ministerial Strategic Steering Group

Mar a leanas atá an t-eolas:

Athbhreithniú/ Comhairliú	Costas Go D tí Seo (Nollaig 2001)
Grúpa Athbhreithne Géarotharlann	£571,898
Athbhreithniú ar Mháinliacht Chairdiach	*
Athbhreithniú ar Acht Fíocháin Dhaonna (TÉ) 1962	Náid
Athbhreithniú Coimisiúin um Shláinte Meabhrach	£34,721
Athbhreithniú ar Sheirbhísí Dianchúraim	*
Athbhreithniú ar Sheirbhísí Cúram Pobail	£55,500
Foirmlé Chaipitíochta – Comhairliú ar Cur chuige nua	£756 (níl costas clódóireachta agus poiblíochta san áireamh)
Plean Cur i bhFeidhm Seirbhísí Otharchairr (Comhairliú)	Náid
Lárú Seirbhísí Máithreachais Bhéal Feirste (Comhairliú)	£3,995 (Clódóireacht)
Sárchleachtadh - Sárchúram (Comhairliú)	£27,219 (Clódóireacht)
Ag Tógáil an Bhealaigh chun Tosaigh i bPríomhchúram (Comhairliú)	£53,490
Comhairliú ar Dhaingniú Plúir le hAigéad Fólach chun máchail i bPíobáin Néarógacha a chosc	Náid
Impleachtaí Polasaithe Comhanannais Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí (Comhairliú 2 Céim)	£39,600

Ag Coimhead ár sláinte – Dréacht-straitéis um Shláinte Meabhrach agus Mothúchánach a chur chun cinn (Comhairliú)	£1,000
'Miotais agus Réaltacht' – Tuairisc an Ghrúpa Oibre ar Thoircheas Déagóirí agus Thuismíocht (Comhairliú)	£6,000
¹ Athbhreithniú ar Fhoirne Comhordaithe Drúgaí agus Alcóil	£25,483
Infheistíocht sa tSláinte – Comhairliú	£147,375

* Níl costais ar fáil go toilteanach.

¹ Glactha chun tosaigh ag an Ghrúpa Stiúrtha Straitéise Aireachta Drúgaí agus Alcóil

Food Standards Agency: Tests for Shellfish Poisoning

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1103/01, to detail if procedures used by her Department in tests on scallop fisheries for amnesic and diarrhetic shellfish poisoning are the same as the tests used by authorities in the rest of the UK and Europe; and to make a statement. (AQW 1689/01)

Ms de Brún: Food safety and public health protection in this area is a matter for the Food Standards Agency (FSA). The agency has responsibility for food policy and ensuring its effective implementation. In relation to shellfish, the agency has in place a sampling and testing programme. Testing is carried out by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Veterinary Science Division. The Shellfish Hygiene Directive, however, does not specify the methods to be used for the tests.

The question raises two distinct issues. First, in relation to amnesic shellfish poisoning (ASP), the test used here is a standardised chemical test which is the same as that used in Great Britain and the South of Ireland. The situation across the rest of Europe is unclear but it is unlikely that there are any great differences to the testing methods used here and in Great Britain given that the test is a standardised chemical one.

The position in relation to diarrhetic shellfish poisoning (DSP) is quite different in that there are slight variations in the tests used both in Great Britain and here and throughout Europe. The reason for this is that the EC Directive is non-prescriptive and uses the term, "the customary bioassay". It is therefore up to individual Member States to determine which bioassay they use.

The FSA regards this approach as unacceptable and has been instrumental in raising the issue with the EC and securing, in the interests of harmonising European testing, a Draft Commission Decision (Sanco/2227/2001) establishing the methods of analysis and the maximum limits for certain marine biotoxins such as those of the

DSP complex (Okadaic acid and Dinophysistoxins), Yessotoxins, Pectenotoxins and Azaspiracids.

Officials from the FSA attended at Brussels to secure this position and it is pleasing to note that the new proposal accords with the test used here.

Is ceist don Ghníomhaireacht Chaighdeáin Bhia (GCB) iad sábháilteacht bhia agus cosaint sláinte an phobail sa réimse seo. Tá an Ghníomhaireacht freagrach as polasaí bia agus as cinntiú a chur i bhfeidhm éifeachtaigh. Maidir le bia sliogán, tá clár blais agus tástála i bhfeidhm ag an Ghníomhaireacht. Déanann Rannóg Tréidliachta na Roinne Talmhaíochta agus Forbartha Tuaithe an tástáil. Ní thugann an Treoir ar Shláinteachas Bia Sliogán mionchuntas ar na modhanna atá le húsáid do na tástálacha.

Tarraingíonn an cheist dhá cheist ar leith anuas. Ar dtús, maidir le nimhiú amneasach ó bhia sliogán (NABS), is ionann an tástáil chaighdeánach cheimiceach úsáidte anseo agus an tástáil úsáidte sa Bhreatain Mhór agus i nDeisceart na hÉireann. Tá an riocht ar fud na coda eile den Eoraip doiléir ach ní dócha go bhfuil difríochtaí móra ann idir na modhanna tástála úsáidte anseo agus sa Bhreatain Mhór mar gur tástáil chaighdeánach cheimiceach í an tástáil.

Scéal eile atá ann maidir le nimhiú buinneach bia sliogán (NBBS) áfach mar go bhfuil difríochtaí beaga ann sna tástálacha úsáidte sa Bhreatain Mhór agus anseo araon agus ar fud na hEorpa. Is í Treoir an CE is cúis leo seo mar go bhfuil sí neamhrúrach agus go n-úsáideann sí an téarma "an ghnáth-bhithmheasúnacht". Mar sin de, tá sé faoi na Ballstáit indibhidiúla cinneadh a dhéanamh ar an bhithmheasúnacht a úsáideann siad.

Measann an GSB gur doghlactha an cur chuige seo agus ba é ba chúis le tógáil na ceiste leis an CE agus, ar mhaithe le comhordú tástála Eorpaí, le Dréacht-Chinneadh an Coimisiúin a chinntiú (Sanco/2227/2001) ag daingniú na modhanna anailíse agus na n-uaschailcí do bhith- thocsainí mara ar leith cosúil leo siúd den choimpléasc NBBS (aigéad Ocadáiceach agus Dinophysistocsainí), Yessotocsainí, Pectenotocsainí and Azaspiragéid.

Bhí oifigigh ón GSB sa Bhuiséil leis an riocht seo a chinntiú agus tá sé sásúil le tabhairt faoi deara go bhfuil an moladh nua de réir na tástála úsáidte anseo.

Equality Scheme: Complaints

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQO 1275/00, to provide an update in relation to (a) any complaints received by her Department under its Equality scheme; (b) the nature of each complaint; and (c) any action taken to resolve each complaint. (AQW 1739/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department has received five complaints since its Equality Scheme was approved by the Equality Commission. Four of these concern the provision of sub-fertility services, including the provision of the recently established interim service. One complaint was in relation to access to a social education centre.

In three of these complaints, my Department carried out an initial internal investigation and responded to the complainant within one month, as required by the Equality Scheme. This process is under way on the remaining two, which have only recently been received.

Fuair an Roinn s'agam 5 gearán ó cheadaigh an Coimisiún um Comhionannas an Scéim Chomhionannais dá cuid. Bhain ceathrar acu siúd le soláthar seirbhíse fo-thorthúlachta agus ina measc siúd bhí soláthar na seirbhíse idirlinne a bunaíodh le gairid. Bhain gearán amháin le rochtain ar ionad oideachais shóisialta.

Le trí cinn de na gearáin seo, rinne an Roinn s'agam imscrúdú tosaigh inmheánach agus thug sí freagairtí do na daoine a rinne na gearáin, de réir na Scéime Comhionannais. Tá an próiseas idir lámha leis an bheirt eile nach bhfuarthas ach le gairid.

Home-Start

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 966/01, what grant aid is available to support Home-Start.
(AQW 1746/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department provides grant aid on an annual basis to Home-Start's Regional Office to support its central administrative expenditure. In 2000-01, this amounted to £40,406 and in 2001-02, £41,416 is being provided.

In addition, under the interim funding arrangements announced by the Minister for Finance and Personnel in February 2001, Home-Start received a total of £137,373 to support its local and regional activity. I also understand that Home-Start has made application under Peace II to support its local and regional activity and that this is currently under consideration.

Tugann an Roinn s'agamsa deontas-i-gcabhair go bliantúil d'Oifig Réigiúnach Home Start chun tacú lena caiteachas lárnach riaracháin. I 2000/01, ba é £40,406 san iomlán an deontas a tugadh agus sa bhliain 2001/02, tá £41,416 á sholáthar.

Ina theannta sin, de réir na socruithe eatramhacha maoinithe fógartha ag an Aire Airgeadais agus Pearsanra i bhFeabhra 2002, fuair Home Start £137,373 san iomlán le tacú lena gníomhaíocht áitiúil agus réigiúnach. Tuigim fosta gur chuir Home Start iarratas isteach de réir PEACE 2 chun tacú lena gníomhaíocht áitiúil agus réigiúnach agus go bhfuil sé seo á mheas i láthair na huaire.

Quinquennial Review of the Fire Authority

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made on the Quinquennial Review of the Fire Authority.
(AQW 1753/01)

Ms de Brún: A local consultancy firm, DTZ Piedad, has been commissioned to carry out a Quinquennial Review of the Fire Authority. The Review will follow the guidelines set out for executive Non-Departmental Public Bodies and will take place in two stages. The first will establish if there is a continuing need for an Authority and, if so, what would be the most appropriate type of body. The report of Stage 1 of the Review is due with my Department in April 2002. If it is decided that the Fire Authority should continue in its present form, the second stage of the review will then look at how the Authority carries out its duties and make appropriate recommendations for improvement.

Coimisiúnaíodh comhlacht áitiúil, DTZ Piedad, chun Athbhreithniú Cúig Bliana a dhéanamh ar an Údarás Dóiteáin. Leanfaidh an tAthbhreithniú na treoracha a leagadh amach i leith Comhlachtaí Poiblí Neamhroinne agus tarlóidh sé i ndá chéim. Gheobhaidh an chéad cheann amach má tá gá leanúnach ann le haghaidh Údarás Dóiteáin agus, más amhlaidh an cas, cén cineál comhlachta ab fóirsteanaí. Tá an tuairisc ar Chéim 1 den Athbhreithniú le bheith istigh ag an Roinn s'agam in Aibreán 2002. Má shocraítear gur chóir leanúint leis an Údarás Dóiteáin mar atá faoi láthair, amharcaidh an dara céim den athbhreithniú ar an dóigh a gcuireann an tÚdarás a chuid dualgaisí i bhfeidhm agus déanfaidh sé moltaí cuí i leith feabhsúcháin.

Waiting Times

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current average waiting time for patients requiring (a) hip replacement surgery; and (b) heart bypass surgery.
(AQW 1754/01)

Ms de Brún: In 2000-01, the average completed waiting time for hip replacement operations here was 206 days, and for heart bypass operations 195 days.

I 2000/01 ba é 206 lá an meánam críochnaithe feithimh le haghaidh athchur cromáin, agus 195 lá le haghaidh obráidí seach-chónaire croí.

Rehabilitation Workers

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (a) people who have trained as Rehabilitation Workers (to work with those with sight problems) by availing of the bursary scheme in the last five years; (b) Rehabilitation Workers who have trained as Social Workers in the last

five years; and (c) Rehabilitation Workers who have taken up Social Work posts; and to make a statement.

(AQW 1785/01)

Ms de Brún: In the last five years, two people trained as rehabilitation workers through a bursary scheme offered by the Department (1999-2000).

While the Department does not normally hold information on the detail of trusts' training schemes, it has been established that a further four people have also trained as rehabilitation workers during the last five years.

It has further been established that, during the same period, three rehabilitation workers also trained as social workers and one rehabilitation worker has taken up a social work post.

Historically there is a tradition for rehabilitation workers to wish to train as social workers as part of their own career progression. Accordingly, boards and trusts are aware of the need to plan for replacement and review this annually.

Sna 5 bliain deireanach, d'oil 2 duine mar Oibrithe Athshlánaithe trí scéim sparántachta tairgthe ag an Roinn (1999/2000).

Cé nach mbíonn eolas ag an Roinn ar shonraí scéimeanna oiliúna na nIontaobhas de ghnáth, deimhníodh gur oil 4 duine eile mar oibrithe athshlánaithe fosta i rith na 5 bliain deireanach.

Deimhníodh fosta gur oil 3 oibrí athshlánaithe fosta mar oibrithe sóisialta agus gur thosaigh oibrí athshlánaithe amháin i bpost oibre sóisialta, i rith na tréimhse céanna.

Go stairiúil, tá claonadh méine ag oibrithe athshlánaithe le bheith oilte mar oibrithe sóisialta mar chuid de dhul chun cinn a slí beatha féin. Mar sin de, tá a fhios ag Boird agus ag Iontaobhais ar an ghá le pleanáil a dhéanamh le hionadaithe a fhóstu agus déanann siad athbhreithniú uirthi seo go bliantúil.

MMR Vaccine

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the estimated cost of the introduction of single vaccines for measles, mumps and rubella.

(AQW 1789/01)

Ms de Brún: The combined MMR vaccine is assessed to be the safest and best option to protect children against these potentially serious diseases. No estimate has therefore been made of the cost of introducing single vaccines here.

Meastar an chomhvacsáin MMR mar an dóigh is sábháilte agus is fearr chun páistí a chosaint ar na galair thromchúiseacha ionchasacha seo. Mar sin de, ní dheanadh meastachán ar chostas thabhairt isteach vacsaíní singile anseo.

Flu Vaccines

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many flu vaccines have been administered in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1790/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is available on the number of flu vaccines administered to the "at risk" population and is detailed in the table below.

Year	Flu Vaccines Administered
1999/00	107,104
2000/01	221,848
2001/02 ⁽¹⁾	238,624

⁽¹⁾To end November 2001

Tá an t-eolas ar fáil ar líon na vacsaíní flíú a tugadh don phobal 'i mbaol' agus tá sé léirithe sa tábla thíos.

Bliain	Vacsáiní Flíú Tugtha
1999/00	107,104
2000/01	221,848
2001/02 ⁽¹⁾	238,624

⁽¹⁾Go dtí deireadh na Samhna 2001

Anti-Smoking Campaign

Ms Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if her Department is monitoring the response to the Health Promotion Agency's Anti-Smoking Campaign.

(AQO 807/01)

Ms de Brún: Yes. My officials will continue to work closely with the Health Promotion Agency to monitor, through pre- and post-campaign surveys, the impact of this latest phase of the campaign upon the target audience.

The "artery" anti-smoking advertisement, currently running on television, has been adapted from a very successful campaign in Australia and received a positive reaction when pre-tested here with the target group – adult smokers, mainly from lower income groups. The post-campaign evaluation will provide valuable information, and in particular, on the impact of the campaign in persuading smokers to quit.

Tá sí. Leanfaidh mo chuid oifigeach ar aghaidh obair a dhéanamh go dlúth leis an Ghníomhaireacht um Chur Chun Cinn Sláinte chun monatóireacht, trí réamhshuirbhéanna agus iarshuirbhéanna feachtais, a dhéanamh ar thionchar na céime is déanaí seo den fheachtas ar an dream daoine ar leith sin ar a bhfuil sí dírithe.

Athchóiríodh an fógra frithchaitheamh tobac "artaire" atá á chraoladh i láthair na huaire ar an teilifís, ó fheachtas iontach rathúil san Astráil agus freagraíodh go dearfach dó nuair a díríodh ar an dream daoine ar

leith é roimhe sin – go príomhá ar chaiteoirí fásta tobac ó aicmí ísealioncaim. Soláthróidh an measúnú iarfheachtais eolas tábhachtach, go háirithe ar thionchar an fheachtais le háitiú ar chaiteoirí tobac éirí as na toitíní.

Disposal of Toxic Waste

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the methods used to dispose of toxic waste from hospitals. (AQO 769/01)

Ms de Brún: Toxic waste produced in hospitals here is collected by licensed waste management contractors and disposed of either by high temperature incineration or recycling.

A specialist licensed haulage contractor carries the waste, which is contained in a colour-coded rigid plastic bin which is sealed and labelled.

Bailítear dramhaíl thocsaineach táirgthe in otharlanna anseo ag conraitheoirí ceadúnaithe láimhseáil dramhaíola agus faightear réidh di trí dhó ardteochta nó trí athchúrsáil.

Iompraíonn sainchonraitheoir tarlaithe ceadúnaithe an dramhaíl in araid phlaisteach righin chód-daite atá séalaithe agus a gcuirtear lipéad uirthi.

Mid-Ulster Hospital, Magherafelt

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action she has taken to secure the future provision of acute medical and maternity services at the Mid-Ulster Hospital, Magherafelt. (AQO 776/01)

Ms de Brún: The United Hospitals Trust, with the support of Northern Health and Social Services Board, has invested significant additional resources in order to maintain services at the Mid-Ulster Hospital. The trust recently initiated discussion with the Northern Health and Social Services Board and my Department to identify what further action is required during 2002-03 in order to sustain services at the hospital.

Tá acmhainní móra breise infheistithe ag Iontaobhas Ospidéal Aontaithe le tacaíocht ó Bhord Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta an Tuaiscirt le seirbhísí a chothabháil ag Ospidéal Lár Uladh. Thosaigh an tIontaobhas plé le gairid leis an Bhord Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta agus mo le Roinn le cibé gníomhaíocht eile a aithint is gá a le linn 2002-03 le seirbhísí a choinneáil san ospidéal.

Local Health and Social Care Groups

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her plans for the new Local Health and Social Care Groups. (AQO 803/01)

Ms de Brún: On 16 October 2001 I announced my intention to introduce new Local Health and Social Care Groups. On November 2001, the first set of guidance was issued covering their establishment. This guidance has enabled the process of setting up Local Health and Social Care Groups to begin.

The Health and Social Services Boards have consulted widely on the configuration of the Groups and are making proposals for consideration by my Department. I will shortly announce the total number of Local Health and Social Care Groups to be established. Further guidance will issue shortly which will allow Health and Social Services Boards to begin the appointment of a Group Management Board for each Group.

Following their establishment, Groups will concentrate on developing their role and infrastructure in close co-operation with HSS Boards.

The Local Health and Social Care Groups will provide a framework for partnership working between primary care professionals and between primary care and other parts of the HPSS. The Groups will have responsibility for needs assessment in their locality. They will work in close partnership with other organisations and local communities to meet their communities' needs. They will be expected to explore ways of improving and expanding primary care services for their local communities and to contribute to the planning and commissioning of health and social services currently carried out by the boards.

An 16 Deireadh Fómhair 2001 d'fhógair mé go raibh rún agam Grúpaí Sláinte agus Cúraim Shóisialta Áitiúla nua a chur ar bun. I Samhain 2001 eisíodh na chéad treoirínte ag clúdach a mbunaithe. Cheadaigh an Treoir sin tús a chur le Grúpaí Sláinte agus Cúraim Shóisialta Áitiúla a chur ar bun.

Rinne na Boird Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta comhchomhairle leathan faoi chomhdhéanamh na nGrúpaí, agus tá siad ag ullmhú moltaí lena mbreithniú ag mo Roinn. Fógróidh mé líon na nGrúpaí Sláinte agus Cúraim Shóisialta Áitiúla atá le bunú ar ball. Eiseofar tuilleadh treoirínte go gairid a cheadóidh do na Grúpaí Sláinte agus Cúraim Shóisialta Áitiúla Bord Bainistíochta Grúpa a cheapadh do gach Grúpa.

I ndiaidh a mbunaithe, díreoidh na Grúpaí ar a ról agus a n-infrastruchtúr a fhorbairt i gcomhoibriú dlúth le Boird SSS.

Soláthróidh na Grúpaí Sláinte agus Cúraim Shóisialta Áitiúla creat oibre do pháirtíocht idir gairmithe cúraim phríomhúil agus codanna eile den SSS. Beidh freagracht ar na Grúpaí maidir le measúnú a dhéanamh ar riachtanais ina gceantair. Oibreoidh siad go dlúth i bpáirtíocht le heagraíochtaí eile agus le pobail áitiúla le freastal ar riachtanais a gcuid pobal. Beifear ag súil go bhféachfaidh siad ar bhealaí le feabhas a chur ar sheirbhísí cúraim phríomhúil agus iad a leathnú do na pobail áitiúla agus

go gcuideoidh siad le pleanáil agus coimisiúnú seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta a dhéanann na Boird faoi láthair.

Departmental Circulars

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of departmental circulars which have been distributed to health boards and trusts since 1999; and (b) the impact assessments which were carried out before, during and after such circulars were released.

(AQO 797/01)

Ms de Brún: Since the establishment of the Executive in December 1999 my Department has issued some 516 circulars covering a wide range of policy and operational matters. A list of the circulars issued has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Details of the impact assessments could only be made available with disproportionate costs.

Ó bunaíodh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin i Nollaig 1999 tá thart ar 516 ciorclán eisiúcháin ag mo Roinn; ciorcláin a chlúdaíonn réimse leathan ábhar polasaí agus oibríochta. Cuireadh liosta de na ciorcláin a eisiúdh i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

Ní chuirfí mionsonraí faoi mheasúnuithe tionchair ar fáil ach ar chostas díréireach.

Residential Care: Winter Period

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what additional funding she will make available for the provision of residential care over the winter period; and to make a statement.

(AQO 802/01)

Ms de Brún: As with previous years I have required Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts to prepare comprehensive and costed plans for the winter on the basis of past experience.

I have allocated £10.8 million in-year specifically for winter pressures and community services to respond to the pressures that can occur. This money has gone to strengthen the community infrastructure, facilitate earlier discharge from hospital, avoid unnecessary admissions and address waiting lists. The health and personal social services, in responding to these challenges, provide residential care on the basis of assessed need.

In welcoming the extra money for the health and personal social services in the Executive's revised Budget for 2002-03, I gave a commitment to fund 1,000 new community care packages next year. These will be targeted mostly towards older people and may provide residential care where this is needed.

Mar a rinne mé sna blianta roimhe seo, d'iarr mé ar Bhoird Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta agus ar Iontaobhais pleananna cuimsitheacha costáilte a ullmhú don gheimhreadh ar bhonn a dtaithí.

Leithroinn mé £10.8 milliún go sonrach do sheirbhísí pobail agus do bhrúnna geimhridh le riar ar na brúnna a d'fhéadfadh teacht. Caitheadh an t-airgead ar infrastructúr pobail a neartú, scaoileadh amach luath as ospidéal a éascú, iontrálacha gan ghá a sheachaint agus na liostaí feithimh a laghdú. Soláthraíonn na seirbhísí sóisialta sláinte agus pearsanta, agus iad ag tabhairt aghaidhe ar na dúshláin sin, cúram cónaitheach ar bhonn riachtanais mheasúnaithe.

Agus mé ag fáiltiú roimh an airgead breise do sheirbhísí sláinte sóisialta agus pearsanta i mbuiséad athbhreithnithe an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin do 2002/2003, thug mé tiomantas 1,000 pacáiste cúraim phobail a mhaoiniú an bhliain seo chugainn. Díreofar iad sin ar dhaoine scothaosta don chuid is mó, agus soláthroidh siad cúram cónaitheach san áit ar gá leis.

Accident and Emergency Services: Costs

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give a breakdown of the costs to the Accident and Emergency Services due to drink-driving and other alcohol and drug-related accidents.

(AQO 766/01)

Ms de Brún: The information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

A recent study (Reducing Alcohol Related Harm in Northern Ireland, June 1999), of the social costs of alcohol misuse here during the 1997-98 financial year estimated the direct costs of alcohol-related harm (this includes occupied hospital beds and alcohol-related crime) to be £34 million. In the same study, indirect costs such as those from premature death and road traffic accidents was estimated at £743 million.

Níl an t-eolas san fhoirm iarrtha ar fáil go réidh agus ní fhéadfaí é a fháil ach ar chostas dhíréireach.

Mheas staidéar déanach (Ag Laghdú an Dochair Bainteach le hAlcól i dTuaisceart na hÉireann, Meitheamh 1999), ar chostais shóisialta mhí-úsáid alcóil anseo i rith na bliana airgeadais 1997/98 gurbh iad £34 milliún san iomlán costais dhíreacha an dochair bainteach le halcól (cuireann sé seo leapacha otharlainne in úsáid agus coireanna bainteach le halcól san áireamh). Sa staidéar céanna, measadh costais indíreacha cosúil leo siúd ó bhásanna anabái agus ó thimpistí bóthair ar £743 milliún san iomlán.

Treatment Outside the UK

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if those patients, currently on waiting lists, will be eligible for treatment outside the UK. (AQO 773/01)

Ms de Brún: I am happy, in principle, to draw on services available elsewhere in the interests of patients. The health and social services already make use of services in Dublin, Glasgow, London and other centres. In doing so, of course, care is needed in how that impacts on the overall financial resources available to services here, and there needs to be an appropriate balance, so that services which people need are accessible and readily available. There are also important service issues involved, particularly in terms of patient safety, quality assurance, and proper arrangements for aftercare and for complaints where things go wrong.

Tá mé sásta i bprionsabal leas a bhaint as seirbhísí a bhíonn ar fáil in áiteanna eile ar mhaithe le hothair. Baineann seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta leas as seirbhísí i mBaile Átha Cliath, i nGlaschú, i Londain agus in ionaid eile cheana féin. Agus sin á dheánamh ar ndóigh, caithfear a bheith cúramach faoin tionchar a bhíonn aige sin tríd is tríd ar na hacmhainní airgeadais atá ar fáil anseo agus caithfear cóimheá cuí a bheith ann le go mbíonn teacht réidh ag daoine ar sheirbhísí má tá siad de dhíth orthu. Tá saincheisteanna seirbhíse tábhachtacha i gceist, go háirithe maidir le sábháilteacht othar, dearbhú cáilíochta, agus socrúithe cearta d'iarchúram agus do ghearáin má théann cúrsaí in aimhréidh.

Counselling Services: North Belfast

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment on the requirement for counselling in North Belfast; and to make a statement. (AQO 804/01)

Ms de Brún: Mental health services in North and West Belfast aim to provide a comprehensive and integrated range of services, which will enable people experiencing mental ill health to live as full a life as possible. Recent events in North Belfast have created a need for additional counselling and support and I have provided the trust with an additional £104,000 to cover these immediate needs. The medium and longer-term counselling needs will be assessed by the newly appointed Trauma Co-ordinator.

Tá sé d'aidhm ag seirbhísí sláinte meabhrach i dTuaisceart agus in Iarthar Bhéal Feirste réimse comhtháite seirbhísí a sholáthar a chuirfidh ar chumas daoine atá ag fulaingt ó easláinte mheabhrach saol chomh hiomlán agus is féidir a bheith acu. Mar gheall ar imeachtaí i dTuaisceart Bhéal Feirste le gairid tá gá le tuilleadh comhairliúcháin agus tacaíochta; dá bhrí sin chuir mé

£104,000 breise ar fáil don Iontaobhas le freastal ar na riachtanais láithreacha sin. Déanfaidh an Comhordaitheoir Tráma nuacheaptha measúnú ar na riachtanais chomhairliúcháin sa mheántearma agus san fhadtéarma.

Acute Hospitals Services Review

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the date she commenced the Acute Hospitals Services Review, and when her proposals will be brought to the Assembly. (AQO 800/01)

Ms de Brún: I announced the establishment of an independent review group to examine acute hospital services in August 2000. The report of the group was presented to me in June 2001 and issued for initial public consultation later that month. Following consideration of the outcome of the initial consultation and after discussion at the Executive, proposals on the way forward can be put out for full public consultation and consideration by the Assembly. It is hoped that final decisions can be taken in the course of 2002.

D'fhógair mé go mbunófaí grúpa athbhreithnithe neamhspleách le scrúdú a dhéanamh ar sheirbhísí géarospidéal in Lúnasa 2000. Chuir an Grúpa a thuarascáil faoi mo bhráid i Meitheamh 2001, agus eisíodh í do chomhchomhairle níos deireanaí sa mhí sin. I ndiaidh breithniú a dhéanamh ar thoradh na chéad chomhchomhairle agus i ndiaidh plé ag an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, is féidir moltaí faoin bhealach chun tosaigh a chur faoi chomhchomhairle phoiblí agus faoi bhreithniú an Tionóil. Táthar ag súil gur féidir na cinní deireannacha a ghlacadh le linn 2002.

Nursing Care in Publicly Funded Homes

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much places for nursing care cost in publicly funded homes. (AQO 796/01)

Ms de Brún: The Health and Personal Social Services do not provide nursing home care in publicly funded care homes. Statutory provision is mainly confined to residential care for elderly and elderly mentally infirm. Where such residents require some nursing care this is provided on a domiciliary basis by the local community nursing service.

Ní sholáthraíonn na Seirbhísí Sóisialta Sláinte agus Pearsanta cúram teach altranais i dtithe cúraim atá maoinithe go poiblí. Baineann an soláthar reachtúil den chuid is mó le cúram cónaitheach do dhaoine scothaosta agus d'easláin mheabhracha scothaosta. I gcás ina mbíonn roinnt chúram altranais de dhíth ar a leithéid de chónaitheoirí, soláthraíonn an tseirbhís altranais phobail áitiúil é ar bhonn chúram baile.

Area Hospitals

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the catchment population required to sustain an area hospital with level 2 status. (AQO 768/01)

Ms de Brún: The report of the Acute Hospitals Review Group proposed the concept of Levels 1 to 4 for the range and type of services to be provided by different hospitals but did not stipulate the size of the associated catchment populations.

Mhol tuairisc an Ghrúpa Athbhreithnithe ar Ghéarospidéal an coincheap de Leibhéal 1 go 4 don réimse agus don chineál seirbhísí a sholáthródh ospidéal éagsúla, ach níor leag sí amach méid na ndaonraí ceantair bainteacha.

Community Care

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in laying the foundation for the community care packages announced recently; and to make a statement. (AQO 805/01)

Ms de Brún: Following the pressures on health and social services during the outbreak of the flu-like illness in the winter of 1999-2000, two of my first actions as Minister were to ask the Chief Medical Officer to review intensive care provision and the Chief Inspector of Social Services to review community care. As a result of detailed information gathered during those reviews, extra intensive care and high-dependency beds were made available in the acute sector — a total of 33 since I came into office.

A total of 230 extra community care packages were provided this year, with 1,000 more to follow in the next financial year.

Mar gheall ar na brúnna ar sheirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta le linn na ráige fliú-amhail i ngreimhreadh 1999-2000, ba iad an chéad dá ghníomh a rinne mé mar Aire iarraidh ar an Phríomh-Oifigeach Liachta an soláthar dianchúraim a athbhreithniú agus ar Phríomhchigire Na Seirbhísí Sóisialta cúram pobail a athbhreithniú. Mar thoradh ar mhíoneolas a fuarthas le linn na n-athbhreithnithe sin, cuireadh ar fáil leapacha breise dianchúraim agus ardspleáchais sa ghéarearnáil – iomlán de 33 ó tháinig mise in oifig.

Soláthraíodh 230 pacáiste cúraim phobail breise i mbliana agus beidh 1,000 breise ag teacht sa chéad bhliain eile airgeadais seo chugainn.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Translink: Attacks on Vehicles

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of recorded attacks on (i) Citybus vehicles, (ii) Ulsterbus vehicles and (iii) Northern Ireland Railways trains in the last twelve months. (AQW 1387/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): Translink has advised that in the last 12 months there have been 428 recorded attacks on Citybus vehicles, 1,474 recorded attacks on Ulsterbus vehicles and 383 recorded attacks on Northern Ireland Railways trains.

Roads Service Traffic Information and Control Centre

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how much was spent on the Roads Service Traffic Control Centre in each of the last five years. (AQW 1694/01)

Mr P Robinson: The tables below detail the expenditure incurred on the Roads Service Traffic Information and Control Centre during the last five years. The figures quoted in Table 1 include capital expenditure, general running costs and staff salaries in respect of the Centre itself. Table 2 details capital expenditure on works to enhance the motorway and urban traffic control and information systems.

TABLE 1

Expenditure in £ 000s				
1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	20001/02 (expenditure to date)
£399.5	£423.7	£509.6	£513.5	£429.6

TABLE 2

Expenditure in £ 000s				
1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	20001/02 (expenditure to date)
£214.9	£1,088.8	£2,465.8	£3,830.0	£640.0

Underpass: Plumbridge Road/Douglas Road and Newtownstewart Bypass

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to address issues of road safety raised by residents of Newtownstewart at a meeting with Roads Service officials in Newtownstewart on Friday 25 January

2002 concerning the non-provision of a vehicular underpass to the Plumbridge Road within the bypass project.
(AQW 1713/01)

Mr P Robinson: I am aware of the concerns raised by local residents regarding the underpass at the junction of the Plumbridge Road/Douglas Road and the Newtown-stewart bypass, which is currently under construction.

I should explain, however, that in progressing the bypass scheme a number of arrangements for this junction were assessed on economic, environmental and safety grounds. The preferred option, comprising a staggered junction with two right-turn lanes and a pedestrian underpass, was subjected to a full safety audit before being included in the overall scheme.

In the circumstances, I am satisfied that my Department's Roads Service has taken all reasonable steps to ensure that a safe and effective junction is provided at this location.

Pedestrians Safety: Island Road Lower, Ballycarry

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made towards providing a safe method for pedestrians crossing the railway bridge adjacent to the station at Island Road Lower, Ballycarry.
(AQW 1764/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the carriageway on the bridge at this location is too narrow to allow for the construction of a footway. A possible alternative would be the construction of a separate footbridge, which would cost in the order of £250,000. Regrettably, such a relatively expensive scheme could not be justified, bearing in mind the finite resources available to the roads programme, the likely limited usage of the footbridge and the need for other higher priority road schemes.

However, arising from a recent examination of the bridge by officials from the Roads Service and the Police, a number of traffic management measures were identified to improve pedestrian safety. These include the provision of verge marker posts, reflective signs to highlight the ends of the bridge and SLOW road markings and NO FOOTWAY warning signs on the approaches to the bridge to alert motorists of the possible presence of pedestrians on the road. The measures should be in place by the end of March 2002.

Senior Citizen's Smartpass

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the level of uptake of the new senior citizen smart cards; and to make a statement.
(AQW 1765/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink report that 36,120 applications for the Senior Citizen's Smartpass have been received in the two weeks since the application process began. This represents one sixth of the 217,000 forms which were posted out to pensioners aged 65 and over in mid- January. The popularity of my Free Travel initiative, even at this early stage of implementation, is proving most encouraging. Translink estimate that in the first three months since free travel was introduced, the number of Senior Citizens travelling went up by 23% on Ulsterbus, 55% on Northern Ireland Railways and 38% on Citybus.

Grass Cutting and Weed Control

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development what roles and responsibilities the Roads Service and other statutory agencies have with regard to grass-cutting and weed control programmes.
(AQW 1767/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service is responsible for maintenance activities, including grass cutting and weed control, on the public road network. It would be a matter for other agencies to comment on their roles and responsibilities regarding these specific activities in relation to their own property.

In this context, the Roads Service grass-cutting programme is carried out for road safety reasons, the aim being to ensure that sightlines, road markings and traffic signs are not obstructed by overgrown vegetation. The Roads Service's current policy is to cut roadside verges up to five times a year in urban areas and up to twice a year in rural areas.

In some cases where district councils wish to have a higher standard of grass maintenance for aesthetic or amenity reasons, they accept responsibility for the work within their respective boundary and are reimbursed by the Roads Service for the number of cuts determined by the normal Roads Service policy.

As regards weed control, the Roads Service policy and procedures are again aimed at ensuring the safety of road users. Chemical control of weeds is normally carried out in the spring on an annual basis as a curative measure, with any significant regrowth being dealt with as necessary. Spraying is carried out by trained personnel in accordance with advice from manufacturers and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development using the minimum treatment necessary compatible with required results.

On-Street Parking Restrictions

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the extent of illegal

on-street parking, and what policies he is adopting to deal with this problem. (AQW 1768/01)

Mr P Robinson: The enforcement of on-street parking restrictions is the responsibility of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and my Department's Roads Service has no information in relation to the extent of illegal on-street parking throughout Northern Ireland. However, in 1998 a departmental study of the on-street parking scheme in Belfast (where charges are made for on-street parking in certain areas) revealed a relatively high level of illegal parking.

Also, the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on the 'Structural Maintenance of Roads and the Management of On-street Parking in Belfast', published in December 2000, concluded that, inter alia, the enforcement and administration of the scheme should be improved. As a consequence of that report, consultations between the Roads Service and the Police Service of Northern Ireland have been continuing over the past several months regarding the establishment of a service level agreement with a view to improving the quality of service and the standard of enforcement.

In addition, the Roads Service intends shortly to initiate a study into the introduction of decriminalised parking enforcement in Northern Ireland whereby the Department would be responsible for enforcing parking restrictions.

Falcon Development, (Newtownards)

Mrs I Robison asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) if he will give a commitment for the adoption of roads in the Falcon Development in Newtownards; and (b) a timescale for any such adoption. (AQW 1777/01)

Mr P Robinson: Departmental officials have advised me that, following the recent completion of necessary remedial works by the developer, the roads and services in the Falcon Development in Newtownards were formally adopted on 4 February 2002.

Regional Development Strategy

Mr M Robison asked the Minister for Regional Development what arrangements have been put in place to implement the Regional Development Strategy. (AQW 1792/01)

Mr P Robinson: On 25 January I chaired the inaugural meeting of an Interdepartmental Steering Group tasked with implementing the Regional Development Strategy.

The group discussed a number of important matters relevant to the successful implementation of the strategy. In particular, it considered how each Northern Ireland Department can, individually and collectively,

contribute to the achievement of the strategic objectives of the RDS. Those contributions from Departments will be incorporated into a composite draft paper that will outline the arrangements for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the strategy. The draft paper will, importantly, also set out the practical first steps being taken by my officials working in collaboration with groupings of local authorities to give effect to the strategy at the sub-regional level.

I will, of course, invite the views of the Regional Development Committee on the draft paper. I would hope to forward it to the Committee by the end of February.

Northern Ireland Water Resource Strategy 2001

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development when he expects to publish the Northern Ireland Water Resource Strategy 2001.

(AQW 1899/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Water Service is carrying out a major review of its water resource strategy for the period up to 2030. This takes account of a range of key factors including growth in population and usage, climate change and the potential for leakage reduction and demand management.

The review is nearing completion and I expect the draft strategy to be published for consultation later this year.

Water Abstraction: Camlough Lake

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the timescale for publication of the environmental impact assessment for the proposed water abstraction increase for Camlough Lake; and (b) any implications this will have on the future use of Camlough Lake. (AQW 1900/01)

Mr P Robinson: Approximately 2.5 megalitres of water per day is abstracted from Camlough Lake as part of the public water supply for Newry Town and the surrounding area. Proposals to increase the volume of water abstracted have been deferred by the Water Service pending the outcome of a major review of its water resources strategy for the period up to 2030. Consequently, there are no plans to publish the environmental impact assessment of these proposals.

The review of the water resources strategy takes account of a range of factors including growth in population and usage, climate change and the potential for leakage reduction and demand management. The future need for water abstraction from Camlough Lake is being considered as part of the overall review, which

is nearing completion. I expect that the draft strategy will be published for consultation later this year and it will enable all interested parties, including Newry and Mourne District Council, to comment on the proposals.

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that any delay in finalising the NI Water Resource Strategy 2001 and environmental impact assessment for the proposed water abstraction increase for Camlough Lake, will not put at risk the potential to maximise the drawdown of EU grant aid to develop the lake as a major tourism resource for the Newry and Mourne District. (AQW 1901/01)

Mr P Robinson: Approximately 2.5 megalitres of water per day is abstracted from Camlough Lake as part of the public water supply for Newry Town and the surrounding area. Proposals to increase the volume of water abstracted have been deferred by the Water Service pending the outcome of a major review of its water resources strategy for the period up to 2030. Consequently, there are no plans to publish the environmental impact assessment of these proposals.

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SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Incapacity Benefit Claimants: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in North Down who are claiming incapacity benefit. (AQW 1810/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): The number of people claiming Incapacity Benefit in the North Down parliamentary constituency area is 3,068.

The figures provided are the most recent available and are for August 2001.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Specialist Advisers to Committees

Mrs Nelis asked the Assembly Commission to detail the appointment process involved in drawing up a list of advisers/experts to service Assembly Committees. (AQW 1706/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Robert Coulter): The current procedures used in the appointment of specialist advisers to Committees is as follows.

- (a) Committee agrees terms of reference for inquiry;
- (b) Committee identifies need for specialist adviser;
- (c) Committee agrees terms of reference for the specialist adviser;
- (d) Committee agrees on criteria for selection of adviser;
- (e) Committee Clerk and Research and Library arrive at an estimated cost based on (c);
- (f) If this exceeds £10,000, the Committee will invite tenders for the work through public advertisement;
- (g) If the cost is not likely to exceed £10,000, Research and Library will produce a shortlist of suitable candidates for consideration by the Committee;
- (h) Candidates contacted but not shortlisted will be notified by Research and Library
- (i) Committee makes final selection;
- (j) Committee Clerk notifies successful candidate and makes contractual arrangements;
- (k) The Clerk notifies any unsuccessful shortlisted candidates who were approached during the selection process

This procedure has been made available to Committee Clerks and is currently before the Chairpersons' Liaison Group for endorsement.

I would also advise that this matter is to be considered in the near future by the Assembly Commission.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 22 February 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

North Belfast: Interface

Mr K Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what practical measures it intends to take to prevent the ongoing problems in the north of the city of Belfast from spreading into neighbouring constituencies; and to make a statement.

(AQW 895/01)

Reply: *[holding answer 15 January 2002]*: We recognise that there is tension and the potential for violence at a number of interface areas in Northern Ireland. North Belfast demonstrates the importance of dialogue initiated at a local level between and within the communities. We will do all that we can to support efforts by local communities to resolve their differences. We believe that the measures we have already taken in North Belfast will potentially benefit the neighbouring constituencies.

The draft Programme for Government includes a commitment to support the capacity of local communities to deal with matters of dispute and division including the proliferation of sectarian graffiti, unauthorised flag flying, the erection of memorials and other issues that can lead to community tensions. We intend to bring forward proposals to deal with these matters following completion of the current review of community relations policy, upon which we will be consulting.

Review of Local Government

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what is the timetable for the Review of Local Government.

(AQW 1180/01)

Reply: The Review of Public Administration is due to be launched in the Spring 2002 and an examination

of local government will be an integral part of that Review.

World Summit on Sustainable Development

Ms Lewsley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on whether the First Minister and Deputy First Minister have any plans to attend the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg later this year.

(AQW 1592/01)

Reply: The composition of the UK delegation to the Summit is a matter for the Prime Minister, as Head of the Delegation, and the matter is currently under consideration. We have no plans to seek inclusion in the UK delegation.

British-Irish Council

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what steps are being taken to improve linkages between the devolved administrations of the United Kingdom and to enhance the role of the British-Irish Council.

(AQW 1608/01)

Reply: The development of relations and co-operation on an east-west basis is one of the Executive's priorities under the Programme for Government. A Memorandum of Understanding, supplementary agreements between the UK Government, Northern Ireland Executive, Scottish Executive and Welsh Assembly, and a Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC), which comprises representatives of the above administrations, have been established. The committee's role is to consider non-devolved matters that impinge on devolved responsibilities and vice-versa. This forum can also consider devolved matters where all parties agree that there is mutual benefit in discussing their respective treatment in the different parts of the UK.

In the coming year, we intend to take forward work in the Joint Ministerial Committee on issues including health, poverty, the knowledge economy and Europe.

A number of Northern Ireland Departments have extensive east-west links at all working levels with their counterparts in Whitehall, Scotland and Wales across a wide range of topics which include agriculture, animal health, veterinary matters, trade, industrial research and technology, energy issues, information age initiative, water issues and cultural and linguistic ties.

The British-Irish Council will also improve linkages between the devolved administrations of the United Kingdom

The British-Irish Council Summit meeting held on 30 November 2001 heard updates on the BIC work programme that is being taken forward on important issues such as Drugs, Social Inclusion, Transport,

Environment and Knowledge Economy. Significant elements of further work in these sectors have been set in train by the summit. It is intended that Ministerial meetings on Environment and Drugs will be held before the next Summit meeting, which is arranged for 19 April, when the main topic of discussion will be Knowledge Economy.

As part of the work in this area the summit meeting will be followed by a major Conference on 'Bridging the Digital Divide.' in Jersey from 24 – 26 April

The Council has also agreed two further areas of work to be taken forward under the British-Irish Council – Tourism which is to be taken forward by Guernsey and Health (Tele-medicine) by the Isle of Man. Meetings of senior officials from each administration will be held in the near future to discuss proposals for taking forward work in these areas.

Guidance on Codes of Best Practice for Board members of Public Bodies

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline the standards expected of individuals appointed to quangos for which it is responsible. (AQW 1637/01)

Reply: Individuals appointed to Non-Departmental Public Bodies for which our department is responsible are expected to adhere to the standards set out in 'Guidance on Codes of Best Practice for Board Members of Public Bodies'.

Copies of the 'Guidance on Codes of Best Practice for Board Members of Public Bodies' have been placed in the Assembly library and it is also available from <http://cabinet-office.gov.uk/quangos/index/stand.htm>

Golden Jubilee Tour

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it has made representations to invite HM The Queen to visit Northern Ireland as part of her Golden Jubilee Tour. (AQW 1784/01)

Reply: It was announced on 22 June 2001 that Her Majesty The Queen will be including Northern Ireland as part of her Golden Jubilee Tour during this year.

The matter and substance of Her Majesty The Queen's Golden Jubilee is being organised by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in conjunction with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure DCAL.

As yet the details of the programme have not been finalised.

Visit to East Antrim

Mr K Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will undertake to visit the constituency of East Antrim in the near future.

(AQW 1791/01)

Reply: We currently have no plans to jointly visit the constituency of East Antrim.

Visit to USA: Costs

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the costs associated with the First Minister's and Deputy First Minister's most recent visit to the USA, including attendance at the World Economic Forum. (AQW 1845/01)

Reply: The full details of the various costs associated with our most recent visit to the USA are not yet available. We will write to you again when these have been identified.

Disability Rights Task Force

Mr Gibson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what action is being taken to promote the work of the Disability Rights Task Force. (AQW 1895/01)

Reply: The work of the Disability Rights Task Force came to an end in December 1999 following the publication of its report entitled "From Exclusion to Inclusion" which contained many recommendations for comprehensive civil rights for disabled people. The Northern Ireland Executive detailed response to the Task Force, entitled "Improving Civil Rights for Disabled People", was issued for consultation in September 2001.

Responses to the consultation are currently under consideration. We have asked the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, as part of its role to monitor and review the Disability Discrimination Act, to consider further some other issues raised by the Task Force.

A strategy to implement the Executive's proposals will be developed by an interdepartmental working group to be established this year under the Promoting Social Inclusion element of New TSN. Legislation will be brought forward to implement many of the Executive's proposals for improving disability rights.

We are committed to the elimination of discrimination against disabled people and in view of the ongoing work to improve disability rights we are firmly on track to achieve this important goal.

Planning Service: Complaints

Mr Wells asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it has any plans to establish a separate Office of the Ombudsman to deal specifically with complaints against the Planning Service.

(AQW 1902/01)

Reply: The Planning Service is an executive agency within the Department of the Environment and, as such, it is within the jurisdiction of the Assembly Ombudsman under the Ombudsman (NI) Order 1996. There are no plans to duplicate the functions of the Assembly Ombudsman by establishing a separate Office to deal specifically with complaints arising from the work of the Planning Service.

Entitlement Card

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what representations have been made or are intended to be made to HM Government regarding identity cards.

(AQW 1916/01)

Reply: On 5th February 2002, the Home Secretary announced his intention to publish a consultation paper in the spring or early summer on the introduction of a universal entitlement card. In order to ensure that the paper will be balanced and comprehensive and present to the public as full a picture as possible, the Government has said that it wishes to discuss its emerging ideas with interested parties prior to publication. We have been given assurances that we will be consulted as part of this process, and will consider at that point what representations should be made on behalf of the local administration.

Belfast Regeneration Office Strategy

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister when it intends to clear the Belfast Regeneration Office strategy submitted by the Minister for Social Development.

(AQW 2051/01)

Reply: The Executive yesterday endorsed a proposal from the Minister for Social Development to issue a consultation document on the draft Belfast Regeneration Office Strategy.

NI Bureau in Washington DC: Assistant Director

Mr Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister why the Assistant Director's post in the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington DC was not advertised publicly; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2113/01)

Reply: The Assistant Director post in the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington is a Grade 7 post within the Northern Ireland Civil Service. It is normal practice to fill posts at this grade by level transfer of an existing Grade 7 or from a pool of candidates eligible to compete for vacancies in the grade. Furthermore, it is recognised that it is helpful for the Assistant Director in Washington to have a working knowledge of the Northern Ireland government system.

The Director post in the Washington Bureau will be publicly advertised in the near future to fill a vacancy which will arise later in the year.

Resolving Community Problems

Ms Armitage asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail any plans to meet community groups to try and resolve community problems.

(AQO 824/01)

Reply: We recognise and pay tribute to the valuable work carried out by community groups in resolving local issues.

Recent experience, in North Belfast and Larne, has shown the importance of dialogue to promote mutual understanding and trust where there is tension between local communities. Community organisations have a vital role to play in this, and we are determined to do all that we can to support their efforts.

We have been, and will be, available to meet with community groups.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Gallagher asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what plans are in place to bring the proposed Review of Public Administration to the Assembly.

(AQO 836/01)

Reply: The Executive are determined that this Review will be conducted in an open, transparent and inclusive manner. The Assembly will have a key role in the process, not least because the Review will address the relationship between the local and regional tiers of government.

We have made available to all Assembly Members the proposed terms of reference for the Review. We are keen to hear the views of Members and relevant committees. To that end we have tabled a motion to debate the proposed terms of reference in this Assembly on 25 February.

The Executive will provide the Assembly with every opportunity to be actively engaged in this process from the start. We hope the Assembly will play an active and constructive role in the process. Last month we wrote to the Speaker seeking his advice on how the

Assembly wants to oversee the Review. We understand the Business Committee is considering the issue.

Review of the Use of Public Private Partnerships

Mr Byrne asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what progress has been made by the Working Group jointly chaired by DFP and the Economic Policy Unit on the Review of the Use of Public Private Partnerships to address the infrastructure deficit in public services. (AQO 839/01)

Reply: The Working Group was established in September 2001 to fulfil our Programme for Government commitment to review the opportunities for the use of private finance in all major service provisions/ infrastructure projects, to increase investment and provide innovative and value for money solutions through Public Private Partnerships/Private Finance Initiative (PPP/PFI).

The Working Group includes representatives from the public, private and voluntary sectors and also the trade unions. The deliberations of the Working Group are now well advanced and it is intended that a draft report will be submitted to us and the Minister of Finance and Personnel by Easter. We plan to publish the report, which will incorporate an Equality Impact Assessment, in May for consultation.

Visit to North Down

Mr McFarland asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister when a visit can be arranged to North Down and specifically Bangor Hospital. (AQO 844/01)

Reply: We have currently no plans to make a joint visit to North Down in the near future.

Visit to Newry and Armagh Constituency

Mr Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to schedule an urgent visit for the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, under my guidance, to the constituency of Newry and Armagh. (AQO 838/01)

Reply: We currently have no plans to jointly visit the Newry and Armagh constituency.

Children's Commissioner

Mrs E Bell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give an update on the appointment of a children's commissioner. (AQO 832/01)

Reply: Following a very successful consultation, which closed on 8 November 2001, over 300 responses have been analysed and decisions are being taken on

the way forward. We intend to introduce legislation to the Assembly in the near future, with a view to appointing the children's commissioner in the Autumn.

We are at an advanced stage of drafting the Bill and we are also bringing forward the necessary preparatory work for the appointment.

We recognise that progress in taking this initiative forward has not been as quick as we had hoped. However, we firmly believe that it is better to take a little more time now, to make sure that the office we establish can properly discharge its important role. We believe that by doing this, Northern Ireland can be a world-leader in improving life for children and young people.

Children's Commissioner

Ms McWilliams asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what progress has been made on the appointment of a Children's Commissioner; and to make a statement. (AQO 837/01)

Reply: Following a very successful consultation, which closed on 8 November 2001, over 300 responses have been analysed and decisions are being taken on the way forward. We intend to introduce legislation to the Assembly in the near future, with a view to appointing the children's commissioner in the Autumn.

We are at an advanced stage of drafting the Bill and we are also bringing forward the necessary preparatory work for the appointment.

We recognise that progress in taking this initiative forward has not been as quick as we had hoped. However, we firmly believe that it is better to take a little more time now, to make sure that the office we establish can properly discharge its important role. We believe that by doing this, Northern Ireland can be a world-leader in improving life for children and young people.

Race Strategy

Mr Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what progress has been made in bringing forward a race strategy. (AQO 842/01)

Reply: Pursuant to AQO 625/01 answered on 25th January 2002.

Work on the development of the race strategy is ongoing and will be brought forward during 2002, with subsequent implementation.

There will be a full and open consultation on the document before it is finally agreed by the Executive Committee.

Age Discrimination

Mr McMenamin asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what measures are being taken to tackle age discrimination.

(AQO 835/01)

Reply: We are determined to tackle age discrimination. We will be issuing our proposals to tackle age discrimination for consultation early next year. We will ensure that legislation is in operation before the deadline of 2006 imposed by the European Directive.

In our consultation on the general content and scope of a Single Equality Bill, we asked some general questions about age discrimination. There are many complex issues to be addressed and we want to ensure that we take account of expert advice and comments in taking forward this work.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Newry Agricultural Society's Food Fair: Funding

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what funding will be made available to the Newry Agricultural Society's Food Fair.

(AQW 1867/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): £500 will be made available.

Common Fisheries Policy

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress she has made in securing reform of the Common Fisheries Policy.

(AQW 1875/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Review of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) is a legal requirement under Article 14 of Regulation (EEC) No 3760/92.

In March 2001 the European Commission produced a Green Paper on the future of the CFP and sought responses from Member States by September 2001. Based on the outcome of its consultations the Commission is due to table proposals for reform early in 2002 with final decisions on reform by end of 2002.

The Green Paper provided an analysis of the current state of play in European fisheries including the following aspects:

- the state of the main fish stocks
- the environmental dimension

- fleet policy
- decision making processes and stakeholder involvement
- monitoring and control
- aquaculture
- the processing sector

In tandem with other UK Fisheries Departments, DARD conducted its local consultation on the Green Paper in Spring 2001 with a wide range of industry, environmental and statutory bodies. Responses were taken into account in the preparation for the major debate on the Green Paper at the June 2001 Fisheries Council.

I participated in discussions with UK Fisheries Ministers and emphasised the need to strengthen the social and economic dimension of the CFP as well as the need for greater stakeholder involvement at regional level. I attended the June 2001 debate.

I was at pains during those discussions to ensure that local needs and priorities were factored into the UK position and trust that they will be reflected in the Commission proposals.

Lindane

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will ban the use of the pesticide, Lindane.

(AQW 1880/01)

Ms Rodgers: The use of all Lindane-based products is currently being phased out. Since 20 June 2001, such products may not be sold or supplied in the United Kingdom and remaining stocks of such products in the possession of farmers and intended for agricultural use must be used up or disposed of by 20 June 2002.

The approval for the use of Lindane wood preservatives has also been revoked and stock must be disposed of by November 2002. Some insecticides remain approved for storage and use until January 2003 but must then be disposed of by January 2004.

Foyle and Carlingford Fisheries Bill

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will give an assurance that the legislation in respect of the Loughs Agency will be introduced as soon as practicable and that the work needed to assist people on the water of both Loughs can proceed without delay.

(AQW 1883/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Foyle and Carlingford Fisheries Bill is being brought forward to extend the functions of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC) in line with the North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (NI) Order 1999 and to amend a number of provisions of the Foyle Fisheries Act (NI) 1952 relating to inland fisheries and will

include provision to enable the FCILC to licence and develop aquaculture in the Foyle and Carlingford Areas. An equivalent Bill is being brought forward in parallel in the South.

Officials from my Department and the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources in Dublin continue to work together with a view to producing a final draft of the Bill as soon as possible. While it had been my intention to introduce the Bill to the Assembly earlier, there were a number of policy matters on which it was more difficult to obtain the agreement of legal advisors in both jurisdictions than had been anticipated. However the majority of these issues have now been resolved and it is hoped that any outstanding issues will be resolved in the coming weeks, subject to clearance of the proposed policy being received from legal advisors in both jurisdictions. However progress on the Bill is subject to parallel progress being made in the South. Unfortunately progress in the South has been delayed recently due to competing priorities, which has resulted in a further delay in producing a final draft. However my officials continue to press their colleagues in the South on this matter.

I can assure you that it is my intention to have the Bill introduced to the Assembly as soon as possible to ensure that the Loughs Agency is provided with the necessary powers to licence and develop aquaculture in the Loughs without further unnecessary delay.

In relation to the work needed to assist people on the waters of both Loughs, the Loughs Agency is currently undertaking work on both Loughs for the benefit of its stakeholders. It has recently put in place a number of monitoring programmes in both Loughs including the installation of automatic temperature loggers and the carrying out of regular sampling for the purpose of obtaining information fundamental to the development and management of the shellfish industry. It is also currently developing a strategy for the development of marine tourism and as part of this process intends, in the very near future, to commission a marine tourism audit to ascertain the level of facilities currently available in the Loughs. The Agency also maintains a patrol vessel on Carlingford Lough where aquaculture licensing is currently carried out by this Department and the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources in Dublin, and continues to undertake its conservation and protection work on Lough Foyle in relation to salmon fisheries.

NI Fishery Harbour Authority: Development Projects

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 1646/01, to outline (a) a date for the commencement of major works

aimed at protecting and repairing the quay wall in Portavogie and (b) if she is not in the position to do so at present, to state when she might be able to give a commencement date. (AQW 1885/01)

Ms Rodgers: At this stage it is not possible to give a precise commencement date. While the project has satisfied an economic appraisal it has to compete with other projects on a priority basis, and it appears that this project will not commence until 2004/05.

Removal of Export Restrictions: Foot-and-Mouth Disease

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when does she intend to lift export restrictions on cattle from GB to Northern Ireland. (AQW 1894/01)

Ms Rodgers: At the outset of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD), in February 2001 the Department adopted the policy with respect to trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland similar to that which the EU requested between Great Britain and any other Member State in that all imports of cattle and FMD susceptible animals were banned.

However, as a result of the Office International des Epizooties OIE decision on 21 January 2002 to recognise UK FMD freedom and the improving situation, an amendment has been made to Commission Decision 2001/740/EC which will relax trade control measures between Great Britain and the rest of the European Union.

Department officials are currently reviewing the full range of FMD controls, which were put in place in Northern Ireland. Consequently live cattle imports into Northern Ireland are likely to recommence in the near future. I will announce any decision on these matters as soon as the deliberations and consultations with the relevant stakeholders are completed.

Consultancy Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much money has been spent on external consultants and consultancy reports in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1911/01)

Ms Rodgers: In the period since devolution (21/12/99), DARD expenditure on external consultancy and consultancy reports was as follows:

Financial Year	Cost
1999/00 (wef 2/12/99)	£158,346
2000/01	£538,171
2001/02 (to date)	£632,499

North-South Animal Health Strategy

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment she has made in relation to (a) the common North-South animal health strategies soon to be agreed by the North-South Ministerial Council in Agriculture; and (b) their benefit to the local industry; and to make a statement.

(AQO 857/01)

Ms Rodgers: To date Joe Walsh and I have agreed a paper, which sets out the position in relation to each of the most significant animal diseases in both parts of the island. That paper establishes the baseline and the position in relation to each disease and will inform a decision on whether there is scope for increased cross-border co-operation in order to effect an improvement. The results of that exercise will form the strategy to which the Member refers. I expect the strategy to be ready by the end of the year and to set parameters for dealing with animal health on the island of Ireland for the next 5 – 10 years.

The new all-island animal health strategy will:

- 1) focus on preventing new diseases entering the island; and
- 2) provide a plan for dealing with diseases already in existence such as TB, BR and BSE.

While both administrations have been pursuing those objectives largely separately for many years, the difference now is that we will be attempting to capitalise on the benefits that a joint approach can bring.

Dealing strategically with these diseases will bring economic benefits on both sides of the border and enhance public confidence in the industry.

Rivers Agency

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on the work of the Rivers Agency during the recent floods.

(AQO 854/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am conscious of the distress caused in the areas affected by the flooding on 1 February which arose from exceptionally high tides accompanied by high winds. I can confirm that Rivers Agency provided an emergency response to some 100 flood calls by deploying staff at a number of locations including Newry, Newcastle, East Belfast, Killough and the Ards Peninsula. The Agency staff were involved in sandbagging and pumping operations and remained on call throughout the evening of Friday 1 February and on Saturday 2 February.

In Newry, where there was substantial flooding, some 50 Rivers Agency personnel, assisted by Water Service and District Council staff, distributed approximately 3,000 sandbags to 110 businesses and 53 domestic premises.

Emergency action saved 41 businesses and 36 premises from flooding and reduced flooding in another 86 cases.

The completed sections of a flood alleviation scheme underway in Newry prevented direct inundation from the river.

Vision Steering Group

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what parts of her Vision Report can make West Tyrone farmers aspire to sustainable and viable operations that produce rewards commensurate with the effort required.

(AQO 847/01)

Ms Rodgers: The agrifood industry in Northern Ireland as a whole currently faces many challenges. The vision Steering Group's task was to identify these, come forward with a Vision for the future development of the industry and make recommendations for the achievement of this vision. This I believe it has done.

The Vision Steering Group did not attempt any area by area analysis but I believe that, if we get things right at the Northern Ireland level, this will be to the benefit of farmers in all parts of the North including West Tyrone.

Director of the Agricultural Research Institute of Northern Ireland

Mr Kane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) her plans to appoint a successor to the Head of the Agricultural Research Institute, Hillsborough; and (b) the timescale for the appointment.

(AQO 861/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department intends to make a temporary, acting, appointment to the post of Director of the Agricultural Research Institute of Northern Ireland. This temporary replacement will be made pending the outcome of the public review of my Department's provision of undergraduate and postgraduate education and research and development in agriculture and food science. The Department would wish to consider any recommendations made by the review panel and the implications, if any, for this post before a substantive appointment is made. My senior officials have had discussions with the Board of Trustees of the Institute who have also made representations on this matter.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Golden Jubilee Celebrations

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what grants he is making available to groups

who are organising events to celebrate HM The Queen's Golden Jubilee. (AQW 1780/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is currently awarding grants of between £500 and £5,000, primarily to groups that cannot accept lottery money, because of ethical or religious reasons. Applications are also being considered from groups that are ineligible for Awards for All lottery funding, for technical reasons, eg a group that currently holds a grant(s) totalling £5,000 in a 12-month period. Funding from the Department will complement lottery funding available through the Awards for All scheme. In this way all groups in Northern Ireland can become involved in organising Golden Jubilee celebrations.

Applications were invited for two rounds of funding. Round 1 closed on 30 November 2001. Out of 11 applications received, 10 will be awarded funding. Round 2 closed on 1 February, by which stage over 600 grant applications had issued from the Golden Jubilee Unit. 268 completed applications have been received and are currently being processed. We hope to issue letters of notification to applicants by the end of March.

Cultural Forum

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assistance is provided to local councils to support and develop their arts and cultural activities. (AQW 1848/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department is committed to working with District Councils to develop integrated local plans for culture, arts and leisure. Through the Cultural Forum my Department is encouraging and assisting district councils in the development of Local Cultural Strategic Plans, which will also assist in accessing funding such as that available under the Peace II Programme. This includes the preparation of guidance for councils, hosting a workshop and a series of training days.

My Department will also be arranging for the production of an advocacy document, which would be of assistance in attracting funding and support for culture, arts and leisure projects. It is hoped that this document will be available for consideration at a conference event provisionally planned for May 2002.

Training Programme: Iontaobhas Ultach

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the tendering arrangements for the contract to provide a training programme through the medium of Irish and awarded to Iontaobhas Ultach. (AQW 1850/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The training programme is being provided by Mr Tommy Ryan and Mr Paul Gleeson.

The contract for managing, evaluating and reporting on the pilot training project was awarded to Iontaobhas Ultach on a single tender basis. This was because:

- this project represented a unique and complex undertaking where there was clearly a need for detailed specialist knowledge and language expertise;
- the project had to be delivered to an acceptable timescale;
- the project was to provide the benchmark for future training programmes and had to be of high quality and represent value for money;
- it was not possible to draw up a comprehensive Statement of Requirement because of the largely unexplored nature of the project;
- expert guidance was sought and this confirmed that Iontaobhas Ultach is uniquely placed in Northern Ireland to meet delivery of the initial pilot training programme.

An informal advisory committee will evaluate the project and make recommendations to the Department for future developments. The appointment of any future management agents will be by way of an open tendering process.

Shooting Rights on Lough Erne

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (a) the right of Wildfowling Clubs to engage in shooting wildfowl on Lough Erne and (b) if such clubs are regulated by his Department. (AQW 1882/01)

Mr McGimpsey: On devolution, ownership of the public Shooting Rights on Lough Erne transferred to my Department from the former Department of Agriculture (DANI). With this transfer my Department inherited a three-year licence arrangement effective from 1 September 1998 drawn up between DANI Rivers Agency, Lough Erne Wildfowling Council (LEWC) in partnership with the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC). This Licence arrangement has introduced to the Lough Erne Estate for the first time sustainable local management, wardening and conservation.

Under the Licence arrangements annual permits have been made available to anyone with valid insurance cover willing to comply with the Code of Conduct and Management Plan implemented and regulated by LEWC. My Department has had no other regulating control over the wildfowling clubs involved. The annual permit fee of £10 (BASC members) and £25 (non-BASC members) has been regarded by the Department as both reasonable and equitable given the significant management and conservation expertise provided by BASC.

My Department agreed to extend this Licence arrangement for the 2001/2 shooting season which finished on 31 January on the understanding that we will be undertaking a comprehensive review of future management arrangements. You have my assurance that consultation will form an integral part of this review.

Consultancy Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money he has spent on external consultants and consultancy reports in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1940/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The information you require is set out below.

Financial Year	Cost
1999/2000	£ 8,000 (Core Department)
	£ 26,000 (OSNI)
	£ 53,000 (PRONI)
2000/2001	£388,000 (Core Department)
	£ 19,000 (OSNI)
	£ 21,000 (PRONI)
2001/2002 (Estimate)	£557,000 (Core Department)
	(Estimate) £ 35,000 (OSNI)
	(To Date) £ 21,000 (PRONI)

The growth in consultancy reflects the particular stage of the Department's strategic development. The figures include a wide range of exercises including the development of new strategies across all of the Department's main programmes, as well as supporting the essential development of the Department's infrastructure eg ICT, finance and human resources.

Milk Cup Tournament

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding has been awarded for the Milk Cup programme in each of the past 5 years. (AQW 1947/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Irish Football Association awarded funding of £5,000 in each of the past 5 years for the Milk Cup tournament. The Northern Ireland Events Company awarded funding of £90,000 towards the 2001 Milk Cup tournament, and is considering funding the 2002 tournament.

Insurance for Soccer Clubs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to address the problem

of increasing insurance for soccer clubs, and how does this compare with insurance for rugby and GAA clubs. (AQW 2004/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I am aware that the cost of insurance is increasing for all sporting clubs, governing bodies and sporting events. However, this is an issue which belongs to the realm of the commercial sector and is not one in which I can become involved. I recognise insurance is an essential element for those participating in sporting activities and it is a matter for the clubs to shop around for the best deals.

Off-Road Motorcycle Sports

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (a) if he will promote and develop Quad and Scrambler sports facilities for use by children and adults; (b) if any such facilities exist; and (c) in which constituencies. (AQO 830/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland has overall responsibility for the promotion and development of sport in Northern Ireland. The Sports Council has recently been working closely with the governing body for off-road sport, namely the Motorcycle Racing Association, and those other governing bodies within the family of motorsports disciplines, on a strategic plan for 2 and 4 wheeled motorsports.

It is anticipated that this strategic plan, which will shortly be subjected to public consultation, will map out the governing bodies' vision for the sport's future, and include facility provision for the promotion, development and future sustainability of the sport. I would not want to comment in advance of the completion of the strategic plan.

There are currently ten venues in the province that regularly cater for off-road motorcycle sport. These are:

Parliamentary Constituency	Venue
East Londonderry	Ballykelly Dungiven
Mid Ulster	Desertmartin
North Antrim	Ballycastle Rasharkin
South Antrim	Nutts Corner
Newry and Armagh	Tandragee Tinkers Hill (Newry)
South Down	Seaforde
Strangford	Ballycutler

Library Services: Newtownards

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 1091/01, to detail (a) any plans he has to upgrade the library services in Newtownards; and (b) the timescale for the completion of such plans. (AQO 655/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Responsibility for the provision of library services in Newtownards rests with the South Eastern Education and Library Board. The board will carry out an economic appraisal early next financial year which will look at all viable options for library provision in Newtownards.

My aim is to improve public library services and infrastructure throughout Northern Ireland. With that in mind my Department is currently carrying out a comprehensive review of the services, but improvements are likely to require additional resources. However, we have already taken a very significant step to improve services through the Electronic Libraries project which will be implemented over the next 18 months and will expand considerably the services available in Newtownards library.

I have recently been able to make additional resources available to the Public Library Service. This has allowed the South Eastern Board to release £500,000 for expenditure on bookstock this year and should help improve stock in all libraries including Newtownards.

Local Cultural Strategic Plans

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to create confidence in the community of West Tyrone in the presentation of his Department's culture, arts and leisure policies.
(AQO 846/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department's vision is of a confident, creative, informed and prosperous community. Our goals are supportive of the wider government objectives to promote economic and social development in Northern Ireland and should therefore win the confidence of the entire community.

My Department has a specific target in the Programme for Government of working with District Councils to develop integrated local plans for culture, arts and leisure. Through the Cultural Forum, we are assisting District Councils in the development of Local Cultural Strategic Plans which will assist access to funding sources, including that available under the Peace II programme. In West Tyrone, both Omagh and Strabane district councils have already identified culture, arts and leisure as key themes in the development of action plans for Peace II derived from their Local Strategy Partnerships.

EDUCATION

Youth Service Activities

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Education what assessment he has made of Youth Provision within the

South Eastern Education and Library Board; and to make a statement.
(AQW 1819/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr McGuinness): It is a statutory responsibility of the education and library boards to secure for their areas the provision of adequate facilities for youth service activities. I have not made any specific assessment of provision in the South Eastern area.

However, I can say that I have been very impressed by the standard and range of youth service activity offered by both the statutory and voluntary sectors in all board areas.

Site Area: Primary Schools

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) the criteria used to establish the overall size of site necessary for the new build of a 400-500 placement primary school; and (b) the number of primary schools with 400-500 pupils which are currently situated on a site of (i) less than 1 acre; (ii) 1-2 acres; (iii) 2-3 acres; (iv) 3-4 acres; and (v) more than 4 acres.
(AQW 1904/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The recommended site area for a new primary school is determined by the school's enrolment and is set out in the Department's Building Handbook. However, the areas in the handbook are intended as a guide because the shape and topography of the site can influence its suitability for school development. The recommended site area for a new primary school in the 400-500 pupil range is between 3.7 and 4 acres. The answer to part (b) of the question is set out in the table below.

Less than 1 acre	1 – 2 acres	2 – 3 acres	3-4 acres	More than 4 acres
1 school	10 schools	12 schools	8 schools	15 schools

School Visits: Controlled Sector

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education to list all the schools in the State Controlled Sector he has visited since his appointment.
(AQW 1925/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Since my appointment as Minister for Education I have visited the following schools in the Controlled Sector:

- Vere Foster Primary School, Belfast
- Rathfriland Hill School
- Belmont House School, Derry
- Kilronan Special School, Magherafelt
- Galliagh Nursery School, Derry

I remain willing to respond positively to all invitations which I receive from schools to visit them and to attend events at which I can meet pupils and teachers from all school sectors.

Youth Service: Funding

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Education what criteria is in place for allocating funding within the Youth Service. (AQW 1945/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Funding within the Youth Service is allocated as follows:

- each education and library board receives an allocation based largely on youth population, free school meals and youth unemployment;
- the Youth Council for Northern Ireland receives funding mainly to support headquarter voluntary organisations and curriculum development;
- bids for specific projects or initiatives in either the controlled or voluntary youth sector can be made to sources such as the Youth Education Social Inclusion Partnership, Executive Programme Funds, Belfast Regeneration Office and the Londonderry Regeneration Initiative.

Each of these bodies or programmes allocates funding to individual clubs or organisations in accordance with their specific criteria.

GCSE Grades

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education what percentage of 15-year-old pupils achieved 5 or more (a) grades A* - A at GCSE/GNVQ; and (b) A* - B in GCSE/GNVQ in (i) Grammar Schools; (ii) Secondary Schools; and (iii) Integrated Schools for the year 1999/2000. (AQW 1998/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The percentage of 15-year-old pupils in 1999/2000 who achieved 5 or more GCSEs at Grades A* - A, including the GNVQ Intermediate Part 1 equivalent, is given below:

Grammar	34%
Secondary	2%
Integrated	3%

The percentage of 15 year old pupils in 1999/2000 who achieved 5 or more GCSEs at Grades A* - B, including the GNVQ Intermediate Part 1 equivalent, is given below:

Grammar	70%
Secondary	10%
Integrated	11%

Scrabo High School

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to ensure that any monies received from the proposed sale of Scrabo High School in Newtownards will remain within that Education Board area.

(AQW 2001/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Any receipts realised from the sale of the former Scrabo High School will be used to offset expenditure on capital development in the South-Eastern Board area.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Student Drop Out

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what are the 'drop-out' rates in each higher and further education college since 1998.

(AQW 1657/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 1195/01.

Review of Student Support

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she intends to commission research to assess the impact of student poverty on academic performance. (AQW 1805/01)

Ms Hanna: Research on student income and expenditure informed the Department's review of student support in 2001. The impact of the changes emerging from the review will be evaluated in due course.

Student Loans Budget

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the arrangements she has put in place to encourage a higher uptake of funds from the Student Loans budget. (AQW 1838/01)

Ms Hanna: Students are advised of their statutory maximum loan entitlement determined in accordance with the Education (Student Support) Regulations (Northern Ireland). It is a matter of personal choice for students to decide how much they need to borrow. It would not be appropriate for my Department to seek to influence them.

Departmental Underspend

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the total underspend for her Department in the financial year 2000-01; and (b) the steps taken to prevent a recurrence of this in future years.

(AQW 1839/01)

Ms Hanna: (a) My Department's underspend against its Departmental Expenditure Limit budget in 2000-01 was £17.8m. This excludes New Deal funding which until 1 April 2001 was ring fenced and managed separately outside the Departmental Limit control. Any unneeded New Deal funding was not available for reallocation to

Catering and Institutional Management Courses: University of Ulster

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students at each of the campuses of the University of Ulster who are currently engaged in hotel, catering and hospitality centred courses; and to make a statement. [R] (AQW 1866/01)

Ms Hanna: The most recent data available to the Department covers the academic year 2000/01. The following table details the number of students enrolled on catering and hospitality related courses at each campus:

ENROLMENTS ON CATERING AND INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT COURSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER, 2000/01

	Undergraduates			Postgraduate			Total		
	Full-time & Sandwich	Part-time	Total	Full-time & Sandwich	Part-time	Total	Full-time & Sandwich	Part-time	Total
Jordanstown	216	35	251	10	24	34	226	59	285
Magee	117	2	119	5	1	6	122	3	125
Coleraine	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
Total	333	37	370	16	25	41	349	62	411

other purposes in this or other departments; it was carried forward to the subsequent year or surrendered to Treasury.

(b) Of the £17.8m, the largest element of £7.9m was due to the gap between the end of the old and the start of new European programmes and £2.4m was in respect of capital expenditure which was allocated back to the Department for the current year under end-year flexibility arrangements. The Building Sustainable Prosperity European Programme has commenced. Other relevant budgets have been reduced for future years and will be revisited as part of the Spending Review. These circumstances should prevent a recurrence.

Molecular Biosciences

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what financial assistance has been provided to the Centre for Molecular Bio-science at Queen's University, Belfast. (AQW 1851/01)

Ms Hanna: There is no Centre for Molecular Bio-science at Queen's University, Belfast. However, work has commenced on a new Centre for Molecular Biosciences (CMB) at the University of Ulster's Coleraine campus. The CMB is being taken forward under the Support Programme for University Research (SPUR), a public-private partnership designed to enhance the level of research of international standing in Northern Ireland.

The CMB received the largest award, £14.5 million. DEL will contribute 50% of the costs, matching pound for pound contributions raised privately by the University.

Job Centres: Advice

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment has she made of the amount of personal advice available to unemployed people at jobcentres. (AQW 1919/01)

Ms Hanna: The Jobcentres provide a range of personal advice and employment services to unemployed jobseekers including job brokerage, careers guidance and opportunities in programmes such as New Deal. In the context of the Government's welfare reforms agenda, the Department's priority has shifted to helping unemployed people in receipt of welfare benefits.

New Deal

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the steps she is taking to make New Deal more responsive to the needs of (a) young people; and (b) employers. (AQW 1922/01)

Ms Hanna: A review of the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds is currently underway. The review, which will take into account employers needs, follows recently published evaluation studies on New Deal and a wide ranging consultation exercise. Proposals will be finalised by March 2002 and implemented during 2002/03.

Disablement Advisory Service

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline steps she is taking to assist disabled people into work. (AQW 1923/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department has a specialist Disablement Advisory Service which assists people with disabilities to gain employment. Assistance includes employment advice, access to appropriate training, help with job placements and financial assistance. New Deal for Disabled People is available to people on health related benefits. The Department's Careers Service provides career guidance to people with disabilities who are in education, training or unemployment.

New Deal

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many individuals who participated in the self-employment route of New Deal have gone back to claiming benefit since its inception.

(AQW 1929/01)

Ms Hanna: Since the introduction in 1998 of the self-employment route within New Deal 766 unemployed people have availed of this facility. Of these 343 registered a fresh claim to benefit within 13 weeks of completion.

New Deal for Lone Parents

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress has been made in improving the employment prospects of single parents.

(AQW 1930/01)

Ms Hanna: The New Deal for Lone Parents, introduced by the Department for Social Development in October 1998, provides advice and assistance to lone parents seeking work or training. As part of this initiative my Department's Jobcentre network provides participants with a job placement service and/or offers them relevant training courses. Additionally lone parents can have early entry facility to the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds and New Deal 25+.

Disablement Advisory Service

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps she has taken to assist people with mental health problems to gain employment.

(AQW 1933/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department has a specialist Disablement Advisory Service which assists people with mental health difficulties to gain employment. The assistance includes employment advice, access to appropriate training, help with job placements and financial assistance. My Department also funds a number of training providers which specialise in supporting people with mental health difficulties.

Expenditure on External Consultants

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much money has been spent on external consultants and consultancy reports in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 1934/01)

Ms Hanna: Expenditure by my Department on external consultants and consultancy reports is as follows:

Financial Year	Amount (£)
1999/00	707,731
2000/01	565,829
2001/02	342,413

The 2001/02 figure represents cash spending for the year to January 2002.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

W&G Baird: Printing Costs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, for his Department and associated agencies, (a) the total amount of money paid to W & G Baird for printing over the last 5 years; (b) if the work was tendered and awarded to the lowest tender; and (c) if there was any variation from the price quoted to the actual cost paid.

(AQW 1614/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): [*holding answer 8 February 2002*]:

- The total amount paid to W & G Baird for printing over the last 5 years i.e. 1997/98, 1998/99, 1999/2000, 2001/02 (01.04.01 – 31.12.01) was £681,401.
- The vast majority of the work awarded to W & G Baird was tendered. IDB awarded, through the Government Purchasing Agency (GPA), work worth £40,903. This contract was tendered and the bids assessed against the GPA's standard 5 criteria of, quality of service; technical and professional ability; price; ability to meet timescales; and compliance with mandatory requirements. The contract was not awarded to the lowest tender but was awarded on a value for money basis.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) tendered work totalling £559,546. An additional £40,952 was awarded for work that was not tendered. This work related to pre-press activity on existing contracts held by W & G Baird. Of the £559,456, £266,468 was awarded in instances where W & G Baird entered the lowest tender. Contracts worth £373,078 were awarded in instances where W & G

Baird did not submit the lowest tender. NITB uses a scoring methodology which ranks tenders by a number of criteria including, understanding of the brief; previous experience; key personnel; methodology; and cost.

- (c) The final bill for the work commissioned by IDB was £1300 less than the amount quoted. NITB requested additional pre-press work on contracts already awarded to W & G Baird. The amount of this additional work was £10,000. Also NITB paid £90,000 over the 5 year period for additional copies ie brochures to be published (over and above the volume tendered) .

Critical Care Register

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 1211/01, to state (a) if demand for portable generators has ever been outstripped by demand by those on NIE's Critical Care Register; and (b) the number of complaints received each year for the past 5 years regarding the provision of portable generators to those on NIE's Critical Care Register. (AQW 1656/01)

Sir Reg Empey: [holding answer 8 February 2002]: The operation of the Critical Care Register is a matter for NIE plc. I am informed by the company that detailed information on (a) the number of occasions on which the demand for portable generators exceeded the number available to NIE and (b) the number of complaints received about the provision of portable generators to customers on the Critical Care Register during the past 5 years is not available. No complaints have been made to the Department during the same period.

Unemployment Statistics

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the unemployment figures in (a) North Down Borough Council; and (b) Ards District Council areas in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1809/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Unemployment statistics at District Council level are only available from the claimant count.

Details of claimant count unemployment in North Down Borough Council, Ards District Council and a comparison with Northern Ireland as a whole can be found in Table 1.

TABLE 1 NUMBER AND RATE OF CLAIMANT COUNT UNEMPLOYED IN NORTH DOWN BOROUGH COUNCIL, ARDS DISTRICT COUNCIL AND NORTHERN IRELAND.

Date	Numbers Unemployed			% of the Workforce		
	North Down	Ards	Northern Ireland	North Down	Ards	Northern Ireland
January 1997	2,168	2,125	70,840	9.1	9.3	9.1

Date	Numbers Unemployed			% of the Workforce		
	North Down	Ards	Northern Ireland	North Down	Ards	Northern Ireland
January 1998	1,773	1,900	59,762	7.4	8.3	7.6
January 1999	1,712	1,692	55,977	7.2	7.6	7.1
January 2000	1,457	1,512	44,400	6.1	6.8	5.6
January 2001	1,356	1,445	41,166	5.7	6.5	5.2
January 2002	1,202	1,245	38,433	5.0	5.6	4.9

Redundancies

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in respect of the constituency of East Antrim, to detail (a) the number of jobs lost in the last 12 months; and (b) any projected job losses. (AQW 1835/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Over the year to 12 February 2002, there were 1,429 redundancies confirmed to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in the following four Jobcentre Areas: Newtownabbey (928), Carrickfergus (339), Larne (141) and Islandmagee (21), which are within the East Antrim Parliamentary Constituency Area (PCA). The Department does not produce projections of job losses. However, there have been a further 371 redundancies proposed by companies in these Jobcentre Areas, which have yet to take place.

Financial Assistance Agreements: Shorts Bombardier

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if any financial assistance provided to Shorts Bombardier has been contractually linked to specific employment numbers, particularly the safeguarding of design engineering. (AQW 1843/01)

Sir Reg Empey: [holding answer 20 February 2002]: Financial Assistance Agreements between IDB and its client companies are confidential and therefore it would be inappropriate for me to disclose detailed terms and conditions. However, Financial Assistance Agreements issued by IDB typically link grant assistance to a range of conditions including employment.

Shorts Bombardier: Financial Assistance

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what level of financial assistance he is seeking from HM Treasury on behalf of Shorts Bombardier's application for export credit guarantees. (AQW 1844/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The level of financial guarantees required is difficult to quantify as it relates to complex financial arrangements involving various parties underwriting or guaranteeing different airlines and aircraft types. Clearly however, given the market value of the new aircraft concerned, the sums involved are likely to be significant.

Skills Base/Employment Number Guarantee: Shorts Bombardier

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assurances have been sought by his Department or any of its agencies by way of written guarantees or contractual requirements in relation to the skills base/employment numbers to be maintained by Shorts Bombardier. (AQW 1846/01)

Sir Reg Empey: [holding answer 20 February 2002]: I have sought and received assurances from Bombardier that it is totally committed to maintaining an integrated design and engineering capability in Belfast which will enable it to compete effectively for new aircraft opportunities. These assurances are not in the form of guarantees or contractual requirements. Given the current difficult market conditions it would be unreasonable for any company, not least a publicly quoted company like Bombardier, to give legal or contractual guarantees in relation to its business. Such matters are however taken into account when negotiating with the company and offering selective financial assistance.

Shorts Bombardier: Financial Assistance

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of financial assistance provided to Shorts Bombardier in the form of launch aid for each year since 1989. (AQW 1873/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Since 1989 Bombardier Shorts has received Launch Aid from the Department of Trade and Industry of £16.4m in 1995/96 and £1.3m in 1996/97.

Shorts Bombardier: Financial Assistance

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) direct financial assistance and (b) indirect financial assistance given to Shorts Bombardier in each year since 1989. (AQW 1874/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Direct government assistance to Bombardier from 1989/90 to 2000/01 is detailed below:

Financial Year	Assistance
1989/90	£5.7m
1990/91	£23.0m
1991/92	£21.8m

Financial Year	Assistance
1992/93	£32.5m
1993/94	£24.3m
1994/95	£15.0m
1995/96	£11.7m
1996/97	£6.1m
1997/98	£6.2m
1998/99	£4.1m
1999/00	£7.5m
2000/01	£8.4m
Total	£166.3m

It is not clear what is meant by indirect financial assistance, but I am not aware of any other assistance provided by my Department to Bombardier since 1989.

LEDU: Cost per Job Created

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the average cost per job created for projects funded by LEDU in each of the last three years. (AQW 1877/01)

Sir Reg Empey: LEDU operates a wide range of programmes of support for businesses at various stages of development. Please note, however, that LEDU does not measure cost per job on an annual basis – since jobs in client businesses are created over a time period, in most cases different to that relating to grant expenditure, it is not considered meaningful to measure cost per job on an annual basis. Cost per job is calculated as part of programme evaluation. The last major evaluation of Growth Business Support, for example, assessed the job creation of assisted businesses over a five-year period. The grant expenditure made to these businesses was also measured to arrive at a cost per job created of £8,000. The same method would be applied to other programmes of support. The following provides average cost per job figures for some of the major schemes of assistance.

Growth Business Support	£8,000
Export Start	£4,000
Home Start	£2,300
Self Start	£1,700

Cost Per Job Created

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the average cost per job created for projects which the IDB has funded in each of the last three years. (AQW 1878/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The information requested is provided in the table below:

Year Project Secured	Projected cost per new job promoted (£)	Actual cost per new job created (to date) (£)
1998/99	9,375	4,500
1999/2000	10,166	6,600
2000/01	7,381	*

* As projects typically take four to five years to maximise their employment, IDB practice is to commence job creation analysis in the second year after they are secured. It would not be meaningful to measure actual job creation figures relating to projects secured in 2000/01 at this early stage. The actual figure will be made available during 2002/03.

Monthly Employment Figures: Manufacturing Sector

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on the monthly change in the number of people employed in the manufacturing sector since 1998. (AQW 1881/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Monthly employment figures for the manufacturing sector are not available. However, estimates of manufacturing jobs are available on a quarterly basis and details for the period March 1998 to September 2001 can be found in Table 1.

TABLE 1:
EMPLOYEE JOBS¹ IN MANUFACTURING IN NORTHERN IRELAND 1998 - 2001

Year	Quarter		Total Manufacturing Employee Jobs	Quarterly Change
1998	March		106,580	-1,020
	June		106,680	100
	September		107,840	1,160
	December		107,270	-570
1999	March		105,310	-1,970
	June		105,170	-140
	September		105,810	640
	December	(R)	105,840	30
2000	March	(R)	104,480	-1,360
	June	(R)	103,550	-940
	September	(R)	103,840	290
	December	(R)	104,150	310
2001	March	(R)	102,870	-1,290
	June	(R)	101,630	-1,240
	September	(P)	99,960	-1,660

¹ Figures are rounded to the nearest 10 and may not sum

(R) = Revised (P) = Provisional

Source: Quarterly Employment Survey, DETI

Gas Pipeline: North West

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline (a) the progress made on the installation of a gas pipeline to the North West; and (b) the timescale for the availability of gas to the public and businesses. (AQW 1913/01)

Sir Reg Empey: On 12 February 2002 the Director General of Gas for Northern Ireland issued a gas conveyance licence to Bord Gáis Éireann for the North West and the South/North gas pipelines.

It is primarily a matter for Bord Gáis Éireann to determine the rate of progress of the gas project and I understand the company intends to complete the gas transmission pipeline to the North West by 2004. This gas transmission pipeline will facilitate the supply of gas to towns along the route. In due course the Director General will seek applications for licences for the development of gas distribution networks in those towns.

NI Tourist Board: Funding for Projects

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail by constituency the amount of grant aid awarded by the NI Tourist Board for tourist projects in the past 10 years. (AQW 1946/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The NI Tourist Board has issued a total of 957 Capital Letters of Offer in the 10-years for the period ended 31st December 2001. The total assistance offered under these Letters of Offer is £109,567,082 and as of 31st December 2001, grant payments made against these offers totalled £80,932,956.

A breakdown of these offers by constituency is attached at Annex A.

In addition to capital assistance paid for the provision of tourist accommodation, the NI Tourist Board has, since January 1994, offered assistance towards the cost of marketing tourist accommodation and amenities. As at 31st December 2001 marketing assistance totalling £6,267,949 has been offered.

A breakdown of these offers by Council area is attached at Annex B.

CAPITAL LETTERS OF OFFER TO PROJECTS WITHIN CONSTITUENCIES SINCE 1992 - ALPHABETICALLY

Constituency	Grant Offered
Belfast East	138,033
Belfast North	1,090,825
Belfast South	11,961,429
Belfast West	771,600
East Antrim	4,817,306
East Londonderry	9,875,819

Constituency	Grant Offered
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	13,911,778
Foyle	11,305,080
Lagan Valley	2,835,769
Mid Ulster	3,801,878
Newry & Armagh	9,271,287
North Antrim	9,180,137
North Down	2,839,183
South Antrim	5,502,119
South Down	15,100,690
Strangford	1,840,435
Upper Bann	1,249,976
West Tyrone	3,141,286
Other*	932,452
	£109,567,082

* This category incorporates financial assistance offered to projects which are cross border, across Northern Ireland etc and not possible to link to one constituency alone

**ALL MARKETING LETTERS OF OFFER TO PROJECTS
WITHIN COUNCIL AREAS SINCE 1994 ALPHABETICALLY
BY DISTRICT COUNCIL**

Council Area	Amount offered Marketing Support Scheme	Offers Peace II	Total Offers
	£	£	£
Antrim Borough Council	189,699.30		189,699.30
Ards Borough Council	448,217.33	199,995.00	648,212.33
Armagh District Council	303,285.31		303,285.31
Ballymena District Council	8,356.80		8,356.80
Ballymoney Borough Council-Note	0		0.00
Banbridge District Council	191,359.80		191,359.80
Belfast City Council	1,546,625.76	338,422.00	1,885,047.76
Carrickfergus Borough Council	170,163.50		170,163.50
Castlereagh Borough Council	5,600.00		5,600.00
Coleraine Borough Council	785,512.92	188,139.00	973,651.92
Cookstown District Council	4,325.75		4,325.75
Craigavon Borough Council	16,068.70		16,068.70
Derry City Council	384,829.69	108,221.00	493,050.69

Council Area	Amount offered Marketing Support Scheme	Offers Peace II	Total Offers
	£	£	£
Down District Council	137,867.52		137,867.52
Dungannon District Council	14,645.20		14,645.20
Fermanagh Borough Council	642,629.55	139,090.00	781,719.55
Larne Borough Council	96,538.13		96,538.13
Limavady District Council	17,925.00		17,925.00
Lisburn Borough Council	21,251.60		21,251.60
Magherafelt District Council	43,629.00		43,629.00
Moyle District Council	39,202.50		39,202.50
Newry and Mourne District Council	78,075.40		78,075.40
Newtownabbey Borough Council	7,841.00		7,841.00
North Down Borough Council	28,211.00		28,211.00
Omagh District Council	25,559.00		25,559.00
Strabane District Council	86,662.00		86,662.00
	£5,294,081.76	£973,867.00	£6,267,948.76

Consultancy Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much money has been spent on external consultants and consultancy reports in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1952/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The amount spent on external consultancy including resulting reports by my Department in each of the last 3 years is as follows:

1999/00	£2.3m
2000/01	£2.4m
2001/02 to date	£3.1m

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list all non-departmental public bodies under his control, and to advise if they follow guidance on reporting fraud to the Comptroller and Auditor General, as required under Government accounting procedures. (AQW 1991/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has four non-departmental public bodies; the Local Enterprise Development Unit, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland and the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland.

All the Department's non-departmental public bodies are currently following guidance on reporting fraud to the Comptroller and Auditor General in line with Government accounting procedures.

Energy Efficiency

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on his plans for improving energy efficiency. (AQW 1992/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has responsibility for promoting energy efficiency in the industrial and commercial sectors. The Industrial Research and Technology Unit currently operates an energy efficiency programme, and this role will transfer to Invest Northern Ireland on 1 April 2002. The Government has set up a new company, The Carbon Trust Ltd, to lead on non-domestic energy efficiency across the UK. The Carbon Trust's operations will be based around an energy efficiency best practice programme and an interest free loan scheme. These services will help businesses, including those in Northern Ireland, to: identify their potential to save energy; follow good practice for their sector; and gain financial support to take action. In addition a low carbon innovation programme will encourage and support research and development into technologies that will help to build and sustain a low carbon economy. Under the direction and guidance of Invest NI staff the Carbon Trust's programme in Northern Ireland will pay particular attention to the needs of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

My Department also continues to promote the production of energy from renewable sources and has recently conducted a consultation exercise with a view to setting a revised target for the proportion of electricity to be produced from such sources by 2010.

I am about to embark on a consultation process leading to a new energy strategy for Northern Ireland. In the course of this, I will be emphasising again that our consumption of energy must be the minimum consistent with the needs of a modern economy and society.

Jobs Lost/Created: Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) total jobs lost; and (b) total jobs created in (i) Larne; (ii) Carrickfergus;

and (iii) Newtownabbey Borough Council areas over the last 2 years. [R] (AQW 2060/01)

Sir Reg Empey: It is not possible to provide information on redundancies or employee jobs for borough council areas. However, over the last two years, there were 227, 469 and 928 redundancies confirmed to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey Jobcentre Areas respectively.

Information on the number of jobs created is not available. However, figures from the NI Census of Employment can be used to estimate the net change in employee jobs between censuses. Latest figures show that between the 1997 and 1999 censuses the number of employee jobs in the Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey District Council Areas increased by 14, 227 and 2906 respectively.

Long-Term Unemployed

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of people classified as long-term unemployed in each electoral ward. (AQW 2071/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Unemployment statistics at ward level are only available from the claimant count.

The information has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Strategic Action Plan for the Future of the Textiles and Apparel Industry

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he has any plans to launch an investigation into the problems associated with the local textile industry. (AQW 2085/01)

Sir Reg Empey: A major strategic review culminating in the production of a strategic action plan for the future of the textiles and apparel industry involving internationally recognised consultants Kurt Salmon Associates, sector experts and senior company managers was completed during the latter half of year 2000. Its recommendations were presented to the industry in January 2001 when it received widespread support.

The recommendations of the plan are as relevant today as they were this time last year.

IDB: Baileys

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions took place between the Industrial Development Board and Baileys on the

sourcing of local milk products for manufacture in the proposed new factory for North Belfast.

(AQW 2112/01)

Sir Reg Empey: It would be inappropriate for me to comment on confidential and on going discussions between IDB and the company. However I can say that while ultimately the sourcing of raw materials is a commercial decision for the company IDB will certainly be encouraging the company to source as much as possible of its raw material requirement including milk products from Northern Ireland suppliers.

ENVIRONMENT

Disposal of Fridges and Freezers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what financial assistance is he providing or intends to provide to local district councils for the safe disposal of fridges and freezers.

(AQW 1857/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): I would refer the Member to the written responses to Assembly Questions 1277/01 (answered on 18 January 2002); 1744/01 (answered on 15 February 2002) and 1769/01 (answered on 15 February 2002) which set out the current position on financial assistance to district councils for disposal of fridges and freezers.

Special Studies Unit of the Planning Service: Employees

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the number of staff currently employed in the Special Studies Unit of the Planning Service; and (b) the number of cases currently being dealt with by this unit.

(AQW 1905/01)

Mr Nesbitt: There are 11 permanent professional planning officers, two casual professional planning officers and one administrative officer employed in this unit.

It is currently dealing with approximately 230 planning applications and 130 enforcement cases.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Publication of the 2001 Census

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the proposed timetable for the publication of the 2001 census.

(AQW 1798/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren):

The first census-based outputs – detailed population counts by age and sex – will inform the 2001 mid-year estimates of population. It is planned that these will be released in late summer 2002 in parallel with results for England, Wales and Scotland. These will be followed in late 2002 by a Key Statistics report which will provide frequency counts on each of the census questions. In early 2003, more detailed census outputs will be released which will provide cross tabulations of all the census results. Results will be provided for a range of geographic area levels such as district council, ward and sub ward level. Census results will be made available in a range of formats including a series of printed reports, electronic supplements on CD and via the Internet.

Rates: Orange Halls

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the criteria used to determine which properties/buildings qualify for zero rating, and if he will make it his policy to de-rate Orange Halls.

(AQW 1812/01)

Dr Farren: Both the range of properties that are eligible for relief and exemption and the criteria for determining them are wide-ranging and usually concerned with establishing dedication to a particular purpose such as agricultural, industrial or charitable.

The Review of Rating Policy will examine these reliefs and exemptions including the legislation that entitles many Orange Halls to partial exemption. It would not be appropriate at present to introduce changes since the review is underway.

Vacant Properties Not Paying Rates: Killycrot Ward

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number and percentage of properties in Carrickfergus town centre which are vacant and not paying rates in the (a) commercial and retail sector and (b) in the residential sector.

(AQW 1859/01)

Dr Farren: The Rate Collection Agency is responsible for the collection of rates in Northern Ireland. The Agency records vacant properties by ward within district council areas.

The town centre of Carrickfergus falls largely into the Killycrot Ward and the Agency's records at 8 February 2002 show that:

- in the commercial and retail sector 92 properties were vacant representing 22.7% of the total properties in that sector; and

- in the residential sector 93 properties were vacant representing 6.6% of the total properties in that sector.

The Agency regularly inspects vacant properties to ensure that property that becomes occupied is identified and that a rate bill is issued. The most recent round of vacancy inspections for Carrickfergus Borough Council area took place in January 2002.

Rates Reduction

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of (a) shops and (b) post offices that have qualified in each constituency for a rates reduction of between 50% and 100%. (AQW 1860/01)

Dr Farren: No non-charity shops or post offices currently qualify for rate reductions. There is legislation in place to enable a scheme to provide rate relief to such premises in small rural settlements. Progress on implementing this scheme is subject to the outcome of Equality Impact and New Targeting Social Need assessments.

NICS Jobs

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of Civil Service jobs located within the (a) Derry City Council area (b) Strabane District Council area and (c) Omagh District Council area; and to make a statement.

(AQW 1861/01)

Dr Farren: The information on the number of NICS jobs in the 11 Departments in these areas at January 2001 is as follows:

Council Area	No of Jobs
Derry City Council	1,323
Strabane District Council	138
Omagh District Council	735

The current Strategic Review of Civil Service Office Accommodation includes an examination of the scope for decentralisation of Civil Service jobs. The factors which will be taken into account in deciding the destination of any relocated jobs which might flow from the Review include the total number of Civil Service jobs in an area in relation to the total workforce; New TSN indicators including unemployment levels; the regional development strategy; the effects on equality of opportunity and, not least, service delivery, business efficiency and cost.

NICS Jobs

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of Civil Service jobs located within the (a) Derry City Council area (b)

Strabane District Council area and (c) Omagh District Council area as a percentage of Civil Service jobs throughout Northern Ireland. (AQW 1862/01)

Dr Farren: The information on the number of NICS jobs in the 11 Departments in these areas as at January 2001, expressed as a percentage of the Northern Ireland total for those Departments, is as follows:

Council Area	No of Jobs
Derry City Council	5.3%
Strabane District Council	0.6%
Omagh District Council	2.9%

2001 Census

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement on the progress of the 2001 census, and the commencement date for publication of census data. (AQW 1891/01)

Dr Farren: Much of the effort of the census operation is being directed towards processing the returned census forms. The Northern Ireland census is being scanned, captured and coded using highly automated state of the art computer technology. Once the initial processing is complete the emphasis will switch to data validation and a series of systematic checks on the quality of the data.

The first census based outputs – detailed population counts by age and sex – will inform the 2001 mid year estimates of population. It is planned that these will be released in late summer 2002 in parallel with results for England, Wales and Scotland. These will be followed in late 2002 by a Key Statistics report which will provide frequency counts on each of the census questions. In early 2003 more detailed census outputs will be released which will provide crosstabulations of all the census results. Results will be provided for a range of geographic area levels such as district council, ward and at sub ward level. Census results will be made available in a range of formats including a series of printed reports, electronic supplements on CD and via the Internet.

Monitoring Rounds

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total bids for each Department in the June, September and December monitoring rounds in the current financial year. (AQW 1897/01)

Dr Farren: The information requested is set out in the attached tables. The figurework is based on pressures declared within Departmental Expenditure Limits (DEL) for each Department during the June, September and December monitoring rounds.

TOTAL BIDS BY DEPARTMENT FOR 2001-02 MONITORING ROUNDS

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DARD	June	BSE - Science Service - Staffing	0.4
		BSE - FFEP - Testing	1.9
		BSE - Buildings	2.3
		Foot and Mouth Disease	6.8
		Forest Service - Disability Access	0.2
		Forest Service - Land, Plant, Vehicles, Machinery	1.0
		Review of DARD/QUB Link	0.3
		Total June	12.8
	September	Foot and Mouth Disease	1.0
		Forest Service - Disability Access	0.2
		DARD/QUB Link - Review	0.2
		Fishery Harbours	1.0
		Forest Service - Capital	1.0
	Total September	3.4	
	December	BSE Testing	0.3
		Animal Disease Compensation - Brucellosis	3.5
		Foot & Mouth Disease	1.8
		Foot & Mouth Disease - Other Depts	0.2
		Meat Inspection Receipts Shortfall	0.4
		Animal Disease Compensation - Other Diseases	0.5
		Animal Disease Compensation - Tuberculosis	3.1
		Total December	9.8
	Total DARD	26.1	

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DCAL	June	Additional Staffing	0.5
		City of Culture	0.5
		Sports Costs	0.1
		Funding for Grand Opera House	1.0
		Grading Review of Library Staff	10.0
		Museums Costs	0.9
		Sport Costs	0.7
		Total June	13.7
	September	Disabled Access to Arts Premises	0.1
		Golden Jubilee Celebrations	0.2
		PRONI Replacement of Existing Fire System	0.1
		Armagh Obs. & Plan Refurbishment, H&S	0.3

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DCAL	September	Grand Opera House Development	1.0
		H&S Sports, Soccer Strategy, Mountain Centre	0.6
		IT Development Strategy & E Business Plan	0.1
		OSNI Product Devt Generating Add. Income	0.4
		Libraries Job Evaluation, Pay Arrears & Uplift	10.0
		Main and Small Museums' Deficits	2.3
		Total September	15.1
		December	Small Museums Deficit	0.4
	Use of Library Capital Receipt		0.1
	Total December	0.5	
Total DCAL	29.3		

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DE	June	Disabled Access	2.0
		Millennium Volunteers (Welfare to Work)	0.1
		New Deal for Schools	0.5
		Teachers' 2001 Pay Award	2.4
		Increased Fuel Prices	1.2
		Teachers' Performance Pay	7.8
		Classroom 2000	5.0
		Departmental Administration	0.6
		Increased Fuel Prices	2.2
		School Budget Pressures	9.3
	Total June	31.0	
	September	Special Schools Recurrent	0.5
		Classroom 2000	3.0
		Classroom 2000	2.0
		Departmental Administration	0.6
		Increased Fuel Prices	0.8
		School Budget Pressures	9.3
	Youth Service	0.1	
	Total September	16.3	
	December	North Belfast Package	0.2
		BELB - North Belfast Support Measures	0.3
		Youth Service Capital	0.1
		Youth Service Recurrent	0.3
Gap Funding for Existing EU Projects		0.7	
Integrated Education Fund	0.5		
Irish-Medium Trust Fund	0.5		

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DE	December	Job Evaluation - School Based Staff	1.4
		Threshold Payments to Teachers	5.5
	Total December	9.4	
Total DE		56.8	

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DEL	June	Child Care Subsidy - New Deal Lone Parents	2.0
		Educational Provision & Facilities for Disabled People (FE)	1.5
		Educational Provision & Facilities for Disabled People (HE)	1.5
		Home/College Transport for Post 16 Students in FE Colleges	1.3
		Individual Learning Accounts & Provision of IT Infrastructure	2.0
		Maintenance of Current Expenditure - Worktrack	2.2
		Marker Bid - FE Lecturers Performance Pay Increase	2.0
		New Learning & Qualification Branch	0.3
		Total June	12.7
	September	FE Lecturers Performance Pay Increase	2.5
		Individual Learning Accounts	6.0
		Worktrack to meet contract commitments	1.1
		To Support Disabled People on DAS Progs.	0.4
	December	Consultancy Costs for Provision of FE Accom.	0.5
		Individual Learning Accounts	2.0
		Total September	12.5
	December	Advanced Grant to Lisburn Institute	1.0
		Consultancy Costs - FE Accommodation	0.5
		Individual Learning Accounts	1.5
Post Graduate Awards-in line with GB		0.3	
Consultancy Costs-FE Accommodation		0.1	
Training Centre Receipts		0.7	
Total December		4.1	
Total DEL		29.3	

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DETI	June	Restructuring Costs associated with new Agency/Dept.	0.6
		Total June	0.6
	September	Restructuring Costs of Agency/Dept	0.4
		Total September	0.4
	December	Assistance to Aircraft Industry	4.5
		Assistance to Shipbuilding Industry - IAG	4.0
		ID Shares & Loans	4.8
		Local Enterprise Development Unit	2.0
		Invest Northern Ireland	1.3
	Local Enterprise Development Unit	1.0	
Total December	17.6		
Total DETI		18.6	

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DFP	June	Contractual & Field Pay/2001 Census due to Foot & Mouth	0.5
		NICS Office Estate - Rent/Rates	0.7
		RCA - Business Continuity	0.5
		Restructuring in Core Department	0.5
		Review of SCS Recruitment etc.	0.2
		SEUPB - Staffing & Accommodation Costs	0.7
		Management Dev/IT Training & SCS Development Programme	0.4
		NICS Office Estate - Fuel Costs	0.1
		Peace II Monitoring Arrangements	0.1
		VLA - Grade/Structure Implementation	0.7
	Total June	4.4	
	September	Census - Additional Field Costs	0.2
		Consultancy - Trusts Deficits/Housing Needs	0.1
		PPP Unit Workshops	0.1
		VLA - Grade & Structure Review	0.7
Total September	1.1		
December	Accounting Services Review	1.3	
	Civil Service Pensions - Early Retirement Costs	0.3	
Total December	1.5		
Total DFP		7.0	

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DHSSPS	June	Blood Safety	1.0
		Clinical Negligence Cases 2000/01	2.0
		Clinical Waste	1.4
		Drugs Strategy Slippage 2000/01	1.0
		Higher than Forecast Pay Settlements	6.0
		Invest to Save Prescribing Project Slippage	1.0
		Non-Fundholders Prescribing Incentive Scheme	2.0
		Fuel Costs	0.2
		South Tyrone Hospital Costs	3.8
		Fuel Costs	0.4
		Regional Services	3.0
		Security of Pharmacies' Controlled Drugs	0.9
		Specialist Drugs	2.8
		Trusts Capital Expenditure Programme	13.2
		Trusts Recovery Plans	10.0
		Waiting Lists	2.0
		Winter Pressures	5.0
		Working Time Directive/ Midwives/Junior Doctors	5.5
		Total June	61.2

DHSSPS	September	Drugs Bill	2.5
		Junior Doctors, Midwives & Working Time Directive	5.5
		Laboratories Diagnostic Tests	1.0
		Regional Services	0.5
		Replace Equipment at Royal and Belvoir Hospitals	3.8
		Fire Service - Enforced Injury Retirements	1.0
		Backlog Maintenance	1.0
		Clinical Standards	0.5
		Decontamination	1.2
		Fuel Costs	0.5
		New Development Transfer Costs	1.0
		Nursing Pressures	0.5
		Regional Services	1.0
		Replace Equipment at Royal and Belvoir Hospitals	0.7
Single Use Instruments/Anaesthetic Tubing	1.0		
Winter Pressures/Waiting Lists	3.0		
Total September	24.7		

DHSSPS	December	Anthrax Provisions	0.8
		Trusts Income Shortfall from GPFHs	5.0
		HPSS Cost Pressures	2.0
		Peace I/II Gap Funding	0.3
		Total December	8.1
Total DHSSPS	94.0		

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DOE	June	BMAP Consultancy & Printing Costs	0.5
		DVLNI - Additional Staffing Costs	0.1
		Conservation Area Grants	0.3
		Road Safety Services - Additional Staff Costs	0.3
		Historic Buildings Grant	0.5
		Total June	1.6
		September	Industrial Wages - Foot & Mouth Disease	0.1
	Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) - Costs		0.5
	DVLNI - Additional Staffing Costs		0.2
	Grants-Conservation Area & Townscape Heritage		0.2
	Historic Buildings Grant		0.3
	Road Safety Services - Additional Staff Costs		0.2
	Total September		1.4
	December	BMAP - Consultancy & Printing Costs	0.5
		Costs/Benefits of School T'port Report	0.1
		Historic Buildings Grant	0.3
	Total December	0.9	
	Total DOE	4.0	

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DRD	June	Climate Change Levy - Added Costs	0.5
		Costs Incurred icw Foot & Mouth Outbreak	0.6
		Industrial Staff Costs and Policy Work	0.3
		Cryptosporidium Monitoring	0.3
		Sludge Disposal & Odour Reduction	0.6
		Computer Equipment	0.8
		Increased Costs - Oil Products	1.0
		Contractual Commitments - Rathlin Ferry	0.2

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DRD	June	Additional Training and Staffing Costs	0.3
		Belfast Met Transport Plan, Area Plans, FPP	1.0
		Bus Purchase Grant - NITHC	7.3
		Consultancy Costs - PT Ports & PPP	0.2
		Consultancy re Transportation Strategy	0.2
		Efficiency & Effectiveness Review	0.4
		Increase in Provision for NITHC Loss	3.9
		Increased Costs - Oil Products	0.7
		Increased Electricity Costs	0.6
		Inflationary Pressures	0.8
		PFI/PPP and other Workload Pressures	0.8
		PSO Major Disruptions & Increasing Costs	1.3
		Rephasing of Track Laying Costs	2.3
		Structural Maintenance Backlog	15.0
		Visioning and Regional Development Strategy Costs	0.2
		Total June	39.0

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DRD	September	Air & Seaports - Consultancy Costs	0.3
		Regional Strategy - Visioning & RDS Costs	0.4
		Roads - Additional Posts	0.4
		Roads - Civil Unrest Damage	0.3
		Roads - Consultancy Costs (RTS)	1.0
		Roads - Electricity Increased Costs	0.6
		Roads - Oil Products Increased Costs	0.7
		Roads - Structural Maintenance Backlog	5.0
		Roads - Wage Settlements	1.1
		Transport - Bus Purchase Grant (1)	1.3
		Transport - Bus Purchase Grant (2)	6.5
		Transport - Provision for NITHCO Loss	3.9
		Transport Strategy - Consultancy Support	0.2
		Water - Operational Costs	0.9

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DRD	September	Water - Operations & Maintenance	0.8
		Water - Vehicle Replacement	1.4
		Water - Waste Water Treatment	0.3
		Water - Winter Service Equipment	0.2
		Water - Leakage, Meter Calibration & BMAP	0.3
		Water - Non-industrial Pay Settlement	0.6
		Transport - Public Service Obligation	1.3
		Total September	27.3

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DRD	December	Additional Salary Increase	0.6
		Additional Wages Pressure	0.5
		Commitments on RDS & Visioning	0.2
		Essential Bridge Maintenance	0.8
		Increased Street Lighting Energy Costs	0.6
		Inflationary Pressures on DRC	0.8
		Power Increases	1.8
		Price Pressures on Oil Related Products	0.7
		Profit & Loss Bid	3.9
		Public Service Obligation	2.5
		RTS Consultants	0.2
		Sludge Transportation & Disposal	0.8
		To Acquire Consultancy Services	0.2
		Wages Bonus Consolidation	0.4
		Works Inc. in North Belfast Initiative	0.3
		Additional Pressures - Personnel Costs	0.2
		Bus Purchase	3.4
		Civil Disturbance - Roads	0.3
		Desilting & Reservoir Cleaning	0.7
		Leakage Project	0.7
		Roads-Consultants Fees	1.0
		Street Lighting	0.3
		Underfunding of Structural Maintenance	5.0
		Water - M&E	0.4
		Water - Computer Costs	0.2
		Winter Maintenance Review	0.4
		Winter Maintenance Review - Add.Wages	0.2

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DRD	December	Roads - Additional Winter Maintenance Costs	0.4
	Total December		27.1
Total DRD			93.3

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DSD	June	Appeal Service - Increase in Social Security Appeals	0.3
		New Deal Welfare to Work Provision	0.5
		Loss of Rental Income	1.5
		Welfare Reform and Modernisation-Planned 2001/02 Projects	1.3
		Devolution Increase in Administration Costs	0.5
		Belfast Regeneration Office	0.5
		Fuel Poverty	2.0
		Health and Safety/Major Revenue Replacement Backlog	2.0
		Loan Charges	0.3
		Publicity Committed Match Funding - Omagh Taskforce	0.1
		Supporting People	0.8
		Welfare Reform and Modernisation	0.6
		Voluntary Activity Unit Review	0.2
		Total June		10.6

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DSD	September	Civil Disturbance/Public Liability Claim	0.5
		Loss of Rental Income	0.8
		Public Liability Claim (Daly Case)	0.5
		Urban Comm. Initiative - Old Structural Funds	0.9
		Belfast Regeneration Community Projects	0.2
		Health and Safety/Replacement Backlog	1.0
		Housing Benefit Administration Costs	0.3
		Housing Executive Salaries & Running Costs	0.6
		Loan Charges	1.0
		Reduction in Housing Executive Profit	16.0
		Supporting People	0.8
		Voluntary Activity Unit Review	0.2

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
DSD	September	Warm Homes Scheme	2.2
		Welfare Reform and Modernisation-DRC/EYF	0.3
	Total September	25.2	
	December	Homelessness - Support for External Bodies	0.3
		Loan Charges	1.0
		Loss of Rental Income	0.3
		Public Liability Claims - NIHE	0.3
		SPED Scheme	3.0
		Interim Funding Shortfall	3.5
	Reduction in NIHE Profit-Impairments	10.0	
	Total December	18.4	
Total DSD		54.2	

Department	Monitoring Round	Description	Total
NIAO	June	Additional Post Approved by Audit Committee	0.1
Total NIAO			0.1
OFMDFM	June	Equality Commission - Carlton House	0.4
		Civic Forum	0.2
		Human Rights	0.2
		NI Bureau Washington	0.2
		NI Executive Office, Brussels	0.3
		Anti-Discrimination - Equality Bill	0.1
		Anti-Discrimination - Equality Commission	0.1
		Total June	1.4
	September	Exec. Info. Service - Foot & Mouth Advertising	0.2
		North South Ministerial Council	0.2
Clinton Visit Costs		0.1	
Total September	0.5		
December	Equality Commission for NI - Lease	0.2	
	Funding for North Belfast Package	0.2	
	Island of Ireland Peace Park - Messines	0.1	
Total December	0.4		
Total OFMDFM		2.3	
OFREG	June	Funding from Vote of Gas Promotion Costs	0.1
	Total June	0.1	
	December	Gas Promotion Costs	0.6
	Total December	0.6	
Total OFREG		0.7	
Total Departmental Bids		415.5	

Note: Due to roundings, the figures may not add to the totals shown.

Consultancy Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much money has been spent on external consultants and consultancy reports in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 1939/01)

Dr Farren: The amounts spent on external consultants and consultancy reports in each of the last 3 years are as follows:

1999/2000	- £1,490,802
2000/2001	- £2,068,480
2001/2002 to date	- £1,547,430

Senior Civil Service Review

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 1580/01, when the report by the independent team reviewing appointments and promotions will be completed. (AQW 1949/01)

Dr Farren: I understand that it is the intention of Lord Herman Ouseley, Chairman of the independent team undertaking the review of appointment and promotion procedures to the Senior Civil Service, to present his report to me at the end of February. I will then consider the report and bring it to the Executive for final decisions.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Donated Assets

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of hospital equipment that has been provided by charitable organisations. (AQW 1481/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): During the last 10-year period, the net book value of equipment donated to Health and Social Services Trusts amounted to £5.5m. Donated assets include those bought with legacies and donations from individuals in addition to those provided by charitable organisations.

Le 10 bliain anuas, is é luach glan trealaimh de réir an leabhair a bronnadh ar Iontaobhais Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta ná £5.5m. San áireamh leis na sócmhainní bronnta tá iad siúd a ceannaíodh le leagáidí agus le hairgead bronnta ó dhaoine aonair chomh maith leo siúd a sholáthair eagraíochtaí carthanachta.

Review of the Ambulance Service

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain (a) the delay in implementing 'Mapping the Road to Change - A strategic review of the NI Ambulance Service'; and (b) the reason for an additional consultation document 'Implementation of the Strategic Review of the NI Ambulance Service'. (AQW 1623/01)

Ms de Brún: The Strategic Review of the Ambulance Service, which was published in February 2000 made over 70 recommendations to improve ambulance services.

Since then the Ambulance Service has made steady progress in taking forward the rolling programme of change envisaged by the Strategic Review Group. For example, proposals for the replacement of its existing mobile radio structure with digital trunk radio are already well advanced, as are plans for the introduction of a Medical Priority Dispatch System. Over the past three years an additional £6million has been made available to enable the Ambulance Service to modernise its fleet. This money has contributed to the purchase of over 80 new A&E and patient care vehicles bringing to over 100 the total number of new vehicles brought into service since 1999. Progress has also been made on a range of management and personnel issues.

Further work was needed to fully cost and provide a more detailed analysis of a number of the key recommendations to facilitate implementation. This work has now been completed and the document "Implementation of the Strategic Review of the Ambulance Service" brings forward fully costed proposals for implementing the major changes needed to modernise ambulance services. This period of consultation provides an opportunity to inform the public and interested parties about the outcome of the earlier consultation process and to invite their views on the new proposals.

Rinne an tAthbhreithniú Straitéiseach ar an tSeirbhís Otharchair a bhí foilsithe i mí Feabhra 2000 breis agus 70 moladh leis na seirbhísí otharchair a fheabhsú. Ó shin i leith bhí an tSeirbhís Otharchair ag dul chun cinn go seasmhach leis an chlár leanúnach athruithe a thabhairt chun tosaigh mar a chonacthas don Ghrúpa Athbhreithnithe Straitéisigh. Mar shampla, tá moltaí ann chun bonneagar láithreach raidió a athsholáthar le trunc-raidió digiteach i bhfad chun cinn cheana féin mar aon leis na pleananna don Chóras Seolta de réir Tosaíochta Míochaine a thabhairt isteach. Le trí bliana anuas cuireadh £6 milliún breise ar fáil sa dóigh go mbeadh an tSeirbhís Otharchair in ann a cabhlach a nuachóiriú. Chuidigh an t-airgead le breis agus 80 feithicil nua T&É agus Cúram Othar a cheannach a chiallaíonn go bhfuil breis

agus 100 feithicil nua tugtha isteach le haghaidh úsáidte ó bhí 1999 ann. Rinneadh dul chun cinn ar réimse ceisteanna bainisteoireachta agus pearsanra.

Bíodh sin mar atá, bhí obair bhreise de dhíth chomh maith chun costais roinnt de na príomh-mholtaí a obair amach agus anailís níos mine chun cur i bhfeidhm a éascú. Tá an obair seo críochnaithe agus tugann an doiciméad “An tAthbhreithniú Straitéiseach ar an tSeirbhís Otharchairr a Chur i bhFeidhm” moltaí chun tosaigh a bhfuil an costais oibríthe amach chun mórathruithe a chur i bhfeidhm atá de dhíth leis na seirbhísí otharchairr a nuachóiriú. Tugann an tréimhse comhairlithe deis chun an pobal agus páirtithe leasmhara a chur ar an eolas faoi thoradh an phróisis comhairlithe a tharla níba luaithe agus fáilte a chur roimh na barúlacha s’acu ar na moltaí nua.

Funding for Nursing and Residential Homes

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action she is taking to provide additional funding for nursing homes in light of her recent meeting with the Registered Nursing Homes Association and Registered Homes Confederation.
(AQW 1793/01)

Ms de Brún: I am very much aware of the pressures facing nursing and residential homes. I am at present looking, in the context of my budget for 2002-03, at the scope for allocating some extra money to the sector.

Is maith a thuigim na brúnna ar altraí i dtithe altranais agus i dtithe cónaithe. Faoi láthair tá mé ag scrudú, i gcomhthéacs an bhuiséid s’agam do 2002 – 03, na bhféidearthachtaí chun tuilleadh airgid a dháileadh ar an earnáil.

Ambulance Service Union

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans are in place to recognise the Ambulance Service Union.
(AQW 1795/01)

Ms de Brún: I am informed that the Ambulance Service Trust has no plans at present to recognise the Ambulance Service Union.

Tugadh le fios dom nach bhfuil pleananna ag an Iontaobhas Seirbhís Otharchairr faoi láthair leis an Cheardchumann Seirbhís Otharchairr a aithint.

Children Diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of

children diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome, by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1803/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not collected centrally.

Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach.

Children Diagnosed with Autism

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children diagnosed with Autism, by parliamentary constituency.
(AQW 1804/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not collected centrally.

Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach.

Antibiotic Resistant Infections

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of cases of antibiotic resistant infections which have occurred in each Health Trust in each of the last three years.
(AQW 1807/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is only routinely collected on occurrences of Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA) bacteraemia which are isolated in hospital laboratories. Figures for the last three calendar years for each hospital laboratory are detailed in the table below.

Laboratory	1999	2000	2001 ⁽¹⁾
Altnagelvin Area	3	22	20
Antrim Area	16	16	27
Belfast City Hospital	20	27	51
Belvoir Park	0	0	0
Causeway	0	1	7
Craigavon Area	1	10	17
Daisy Hill	0	0	0
Erne	1	2	1
Mater	11	4	9
Musgrave	0	1	0
Royal Victoria	11	27	32
Tyrone County	0	0	0
Ulster Hospital	5	20	19
Total	68	130	183

⁽¹⁾ Provisional

Ní bhailítear eolas ach go rialta ar theagmhais de bhaictéireacht Staphylococcus Aureus Methicillin Frithbheartach (SAMF) atá ar leithlis i saotharlanna otharlainne. Léirítear go mion na figiúirí do na trí bliana

deireanacha sa tábla thíos de réir gach saotharlann otharlainne.

Saotharlann	1999	2000	2001 ⁽¹⁾
Ceantar Alt na nGealbhán	3	22	20
Ceantar Aontroma	16	16	27
Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	20	27	51
Páirc Belvoir	0	0	0
An Clochán	0	1	7
Ceantar Craigavon	1	10	17
Daisy Hill	0	0	0
An Éirne	1	2	1
Mater	11	4	9
Musgrave	0	1	0
Ríoga Victoeria	11	27	32
Contae Thír Eoghain	0	0	0
Otharlann Uladh	5	20	19
Iomlán	68	130	183

⁽¹⁾ Sealadach

MMR Vaccination

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children have not received the MMR vaccination in each of the last three years per Board area. (AQW 1813/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is available on numbers of children aged two years or under who were resident in each Board on 31 March in each year and who had not had MMR immunisation before their second birthday. These figures are detailed in the table below.

Year	Board				Total
	EHSSB	WHSSB	NHSSB	SHSSB	
1998/99	1,207	483	307	377	2,374
1999/00	988	423	343	357	2,111
2000/01	875	346	282	346	1,849

Tá eolas ar fáil ar líon na bpáistí 2 bliain d'aois nó níos óige a chónaigh i ngach Bord ar 31 Márta i ngach bliain agus nach bhfuair imdhíonadh MMR roimh a ndara breithlá. Léirítear go mion na figiúirí seo sa tábla thíos.

Bliain	Bord				Iomlán
	BSSSO	BSSSI	BSSST	BSSSD	
1998/99	1,207	483	307	377	2,374
1999/00	988	3423	343	357	2,111
2000/01	875	346	282	346	1,849

Budget for Disability Learning

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the budget for Disability Learning in the last two years.

(AQW 1814/01)

Ms de Brún: Total resources made available for the Learning Disability programme of care in the last two financial years was as follows:

	£million
1999-2000	94.3
2000-2001	99.9

Seo a leanas na hacmhainní iomlána curtha ar fáil don chlár cúraim Mhíchumais Fhoghlama sa dá bhliain deireanacha airgeadais:

	£milliún
1999-2000	94.3
2000-2001	99.9

Disability Learning: EHSSB 2002

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assistance is she offering for Disability Learning in the EHSSB in 2002. (AQW 1815/01)

Ms de Brún: I will be announcing my detailed deployment of the 2002-03 HPSS budget shortly. I have already indicated, however, that I shall wish to see investment in community services for people with a learning disability, so that they can enjoy more suitable living arrangements outside hospital (where that seems appropriate). The Eastern Health and Social Services Board will receive its equitable share of the funding made available for that purpose.

Beidh mé ag fógairt dáileadh mion mo bhuiséid SSSP don bhliain 2002-03 ar ball. Chuir mé in iúl cheana féin áfach gur mhian liom feachaint chuige go mbeadh infheistíocht i seirbhísí pobail do dhaoine a bhfuil míchumas foghlama orthu sa dóigh go mbeidh siad ábalta cónaí i gcóiríocht mhaireachtála níos fóirsteanáí taobh amuigh den otharlann (mar a meastar go bhfuil sin cuí). Gheobhaidh Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir a sciar cothrom féin den mhaoiniú a chuirfear ar fáil don chuspóir sin.

NHS Direct

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans are in existence to extend the 'NHS Direct' service, presently available in other parts of the UK, to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1816/01)

Ms de Brún: I have no plans at present to introduce NHS Direct here. The introduction of an equivalent scheme here would cost around £3 million per year. I am not convinced that this would give the best value for money, bearing in mind the other competing bids for Health Service resources.

Níl pleananna agam NHS Direct a thabhairt isteach anseo faoi láthair. Chosnódh a mhacasamhail de scéim thart faoi £3 milliún sa bhliain. Níl mé cinnte gur seo an luach is fearr ar an airgead, ag cur san áireamh tairiscintí eile atá san íomaíocht d'acmhainní seirbhísí sláinte.

MMR Vaccinations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many MMR vaccinations have been administered in each Board area in the last three years. (AQW 1817/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to the answer given to AQW 1603/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 1603/01.

Greenwood House Assessment Centre

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assistance has she given in relation to the ongoing problems of providing adequate occupational therapy provision at Greenwood House Assessment Centre. (AQW 1822/01)

Ms de Brún: In light of the problems at Greenwood House Assessment Centre, the Green Park Healthcare Trust made available two occupational therapists on a part-time basis to assist with the workload. The Eastern Health and Social Services Board is undertaking a review of occupational therapy services to develop a longer term strategy to address the wider issues of the shortfall in occupational therapy services.

Mar gheall ar na fadhbanna ag Ionad Measúnaithe Theach Greenwood, chuir Iontaobhas Cúram Sláinte na Páirce Glaise beirt Theiripithe Saothair ar fáil ar bhonn páirtaimseartha le cuidiú leis an ualach oibre. Tá athbhreithniú á dhéanamh ag Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir ar sheirbhísí teiripe chun straitéis fhadtéarmach a fhorbairt le dul i ngleic leis na ceisteanna níos leithne maidir le heaspa seirbhísí teiripe saothair.

Overseas Adoptions

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in respect of overseas adoptions, to detail, for each of the last 3 years, (a) the number of applications; (b) the number of applications

that have been successful; (c) the number that have been refused by the trusts; (d) the average length of time for the completion of each application; and (e) the average cost of the process. (AQW 1823/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is as follows:

Year	Number of applications	Number successful	Number refused	Average time for completion (months)	Average Cost (£)
1999	45	15	3	11.5	2,400
2000	34	25	1	13	2,340
2001	28	15	2	11.5	3,000
Total	107	55	6	-	-

Mar a leanas atá an t-eolas:

Bliain	Líon iarratas	Líon ar éirigh leo	Líon a diúltaíodh	Meánam le críochnú (míonna)	Meáncho stas (£)
1999	45	15	3	11.5	2,400
2000	34	25	1	13	2,340
2001	28	15	2	11.5	3,000
Iomlán	107	55	6	-	-

Beta Interferon: Multiple Sclerosis

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she is considering the allocation of funding for Beta Interferon products to relieve the suffering of Multiple Sclerosis patients in view of the recent announcement by the Rt Hon Alan Milburn, Secretary of State for Health. (AQW 1828/01)

Ms de Brún: I am aware of Mr Milburn's recent announcement. Under the scheme that he announced, the Department of Health in England and the National Assembly in Wales are committed to increasing access to these drugs from their current level of 3% to 12%. This is in line with Association of British Neurologists guidance as to the proportion of MS patients who are likely to benefit from such treatment

The level of provision already stands at 12% here. Therefore, I would expect that our current level of budget would be maintained. However, we are participating in the Risk Share Scheme that Mr Milburn announced and expect this to lower the cost of this drug treatment as it comes into operation.

Tá fógra déanach an Uasail Milburn ar eolas agam. De réir na scéime a d'fhógair sé, tá an Roinn Sláinte i Sasana agus an Tionól Náisiúnta sa Bhreatain Bheag geallta do mhéadú i so-aimsiú na ndrugaí seo óna leibhéal reatha de 3% go 12%. Tá sé seo de réir treoir Chumann na Néareolaithe Briotanacha maidir le coibhneas na

n-othar Ilscleároise is dócha a bhainfidh tairbhe as a leithéid de chóireáil.

Tá leibhéal an tsoláthair anseo ar 12% cheana féin. Mar sin de, bheinn ag súil go gcothófaí leibhéal reatha ár mbuiséid. Tá muid ag glacadh páirte sa Scéim Risk Share a d'fhógair an tUasal Milburn áfach agus tá muid ag súil go n-isleoidh sí seo costas chóireáil na ndrugáí seo agus í ag teacht i bhfeidhm.

Hospital Consultants

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of hospital consultants who have private practices in each medical specialist field; and (b) the total number of consultants in each of these fields. (AQW 1829/01)

Ms de Brún: In answer to part (a) this information is not collected centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. The information for (b) is detailed in the table over.

HOSPITAL BASED CONSULTANTS¹ BY DEPARTMENT SEPTEMBER 2001

	Headcount	WTE
Accident and emergency	19	18.05
Anaesthetics	159	154.11
Radiology/clinical oncology	12	11.81
Cardiology	20	19.55
Dermatology	12	11.64
General medicine	85	81.1
Genito-urinary medicine	3	2.91
Geriatrics	24	23.73
Neurology	10	9.73
General/other	15	12.37
Nephrology	8	8
Rheumatology and rehabilitation	7	6.82
Obstetrics/gynaecology	57	52.52
Paediatrics	37	36.32
Pathology group	62	61.18
Psychiatry	76	70.82
Radiology	65	62.74
Cardiac/thoracic surgery	6	5.55
General surgery	75	72.43
Neuro surgery	5	4.41
Ophthalmic surgery	19	17.92
Otolaryngology	24	22.66
Paediatric surgery	4	3.82
Plastic surgery	7	6.64
Orthopaedic surgery	32	31.19
Urology	9	8.55
Dental group	12	9.91
Total	864	826.48

¹ Figures exclude bank staff that maintain service delivery by covering staffing shortfalls and fluctuating workloads. Figures also exclude community based and non-hospital based consultants.

Mar fhreagra ar pháirt (a) ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach agus ní féidir é a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach. Tá an t-eolas do (b) léirithe sa tábla thíos.

LIA COMHAIRLEACH¹ OTHARLANNBHUNAITHE DE RÉIR ROINNE MEÁN FÓMHAIR 2001

	Líon	CL
Timpistí agus Éigeandáil	19	18.05
Ainéistéisigh	159	154.11
Raideolaíocht/Oinceolaíocht chliniciúil	12	11.81
Cairdeolaíocht	20	19.55
Deirmeolaíocht	12	11.64
Míochaine ghinearálta	85	81.1
Míochaine Úraiginitíúil	3	2.91
Geiriatric	24	23.73
Néareolaíocht	10	9.73
Ginearálta/eile	15	12.37
Neifreolaíocht	8	8
Réimeiteolaíocht agus athshlánaíthe	7	6.82
Cnáimhseachas / gínéiceolaíocht	57	52.52
Péidiatrac	37	36.32
Grúpa paiteolaíochta	62	61.18
Síciatracht	76	70.82
Raideolaíocht	65	62.74
Máinliacht chairdiach / thóracach	6	5.55
Máinliacht ghinearálta	75	72.43
Néarmháinliacht	5	4.41
Máinliacht oftalmach	19	17.92
Otalarangeolaíocht	24	22.66
Máinliacht phéidiatraiceach	4	3.82
Máinliacht phlaisteach	7	6.64
Máinliacht ortaipéideach	32	31.19
Úreolaíocht	9	8.55
Grúpa fiaclóireachta	12	9.91
Iomlán	864	826.48

¹ Níl san áireamh sna figiúirí foireann bainc a chothaíonn soláthar seirbhíse trí easpa foirne agus athruithe sna hualaigh oibre a chlúdach. Níl san áireamh sna figiúirí ach oiread lianna comhairleacha lonnaithe sa phobal agus lianna comhairleacha nach lianna otharlannbhunaithe iad.

Independent Hospital Sector: Medical Specialisms

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of Health Service patients being dealt with by the private independent hospital sector, in each of the medical specialisms. (AQW 1830/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not readily available in the form requested and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Níl eolas ar fáil go réidh san fhoirm iarrtha agus ní fhéadfaí é a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

Primary Care Therapy Services

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement in relation to the Primary Care therapy services, which have been developed by GP fundholders, since 1993, and if these will be maintained after 1 April 2002.

(AQW 1831/01)

Ms de Brún: The majority of services that have been developed by GP fundholders will be maintained after 1 April 2002.

Coinneofar tromlach na seirbhísí a fobraíodh ag DG cisteshealbhóireachta i ndiaidh 1 Aibreán 2002.

GPs' Level of Service

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she can give an undertaking to continue the level and range of service currently provided by GPs after 1 April 2002. (AQW 1832/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 1831/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 1831/01.

Physiotherapy Services

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement in relation to referrals from GPs for physiotherapy in Musgrave Park Hospital from mid-January 2002 and their future availability due to the shortage of funding. (AQW 1833/01)

Ms de Brún: All four health and social services boards will maintain the physiotherapy services provided to GP fundholders by the Trust at 2001/2002 levels for next year.

Coinneoidh na ceithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta na seirbhísí fisiteiripe a soláthraíodh do DG cisteshealbhóireachta ag an Iontaobhas ag leibhéal 2001/2002 don bhliain seo chugainn.

Outpatient Dermatology Services

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current policy

of the Royal Victoria Hospital towards outpatients requiring dermatology treatment who reside outside the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 1834/01)

Ms de Brún: Outpatient dermatology services are provided at the Royal Victoria Hospital on the basis of clinical priority.

However, I am advised that it has not been possible for the Royal Victoria Hospital to treat the recent additional referrals from the Northern Board area because it is already operating at full capacity.

Soláthraítear seirbhísí deirmeolaíochta éisoithair in Otharlann Ríoga Vichteoiria ar bhonn tosaíochta cliniúla.

Cuireadh in iúl dom áfach, nach raibh Otharlann Ríoga Vichteoiria in inmhe na daoine breise sin a atreoraíodh ó Bhord an Tuaiscirt a chóireáil mar go raibh sí ag feidhmiú ar a toillte iomláin cheana féin.

Neurology Outpatients: Waiting Times

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current waiting list and waiting times for neurology outpatients.

(AQW 1836/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on numbers of patients waiting and length of time waiting for first outpatient appointments in the Neurology specialty in each local Trust for the quarter ending 30 September 2001 is detailed in the table below.

Trust	Time Waiting (months)					Total
	0-2	3-11	12-17	18-23	24+	
Belfast City Hospital	282	332	28	3	1	646
Royal Group of Hospitals	478	839	92	10	1	1,420
Causeway	42	37	3	1	0	83
Craigavon Area	95	187	7	1		290
Altnagelvin	98	180	2	1	2	283
Sperrin Lakeland	78	190	27	0	0	295
Total	1,073	1,765	159	16	4	3,017

Léirítear eolas mion sa tábla thíos ar líon na n-othar a bhí ag fanacht ar a gcéad choinní éisoithair agus ar an mhéid ama a d'fhan siad orthu i speisialtacht na Néareolaíochta i ngach Iontaobhas áitiúil don ráithe ag críochnú 30 Meán Fómhair 2001.

Iontaobhas	Am ag Fanacht (míonna)					Iomlán
	0-2	3-11	12-17	18-23	24+	
Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	282	332	28	3	1	646

Iontaobhas	Am ag Fanacht (míonna)					Iomlán
	0-2	3-11	12-17	18-23	24+	
Grúpa Ríoga na nOtharlann	478	839	92	10	1	1,420
An Clochán	42	37	3	1	0	83
Ceantar Craigavon	95	187	7	1		290
Alt na nGealbhán	98	180	2	1	2	283
Tír Lochanna Speirín	78	190	27	0	0	295
Iomlán	1,073	1,765	159	16	4	3,017

Chiropody Outpatients

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current waiting list and waiting times for chiropody outpatients in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area.

(AQW 1837/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is available on numbers of completed waits and length of time waiting for first appointments with a community chiropodist. These figures for the NHSSB for the quarter ending 30 September 2001 are detailed in the table below.

Waiting time			
Less than 3 months	3 months to less than 6 months	6 months and over	Total
856	73	61	990

Tá eolas ar fáil ar an fhanacht déanta agus ar an mhéid ama a d'fhan daoine ar a gcéad choinní le coslia pobail. Léirítear go mion na figiúirí seo don BSSST don ráithe ag críochnú 30 Meán Fómhair 2001 sa tábla thíos.

Am ag Fanacht			
Níos lú ná 3 mí	3 mí go níos lú ná 6 mí	6 mí agus níos faide	Iomlán
856	73	61	990

Eating Disorders

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action she plans to take following the report from the Specialty Advisory Committee on Eating Disorders. (AQW 1849/01)

Ms de Brún: The Eating Disorders Services report was presented to the Specialty Advisory Committee on Psychiatry in November 2001 and was accepted with no further comments. The Department is now considering the document.

Cuireadh an tuairisc ar Sheirbhísí Neamhord Itheacháin faoi bhráid an Choiste Speisialtachta Chomhairligh ar

Shíciatracht i mí na Samhna 2001 agus glacadh léi gan tuilleadh tráchtai uirthi. Tá an Roinn ag déanamh machnaimh ar an cháipéis anois.

Star Rating System: HPSS

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she intends to introduce and publish a star rating system for NHS hospitals.

(AQW 1853/01)

Ms de Brún: I have no plans at present to introduce and publish a star rating system for the HPSS.

Níl pleananna agam faoi láthair córas réaltrátála de réir réaltai a thabhairt isteach agus a fhoilsiú do na SSSP.

Referral of Children to Cancer Specialist

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the current maximum waiting time for urgent referral of children's cancers and acute leukaemia. (AQW 1854/01)

Ms de Brún: I am informed that most children with suspected cancer are usually seen by a specialist within 24 hours of referral by their GP.

Tugadh le fios dom go bhfeiceann saineolaí mórchuid na bpáistí a bhfuil ailse orthu laistigh de 24 uair dóibh bheith atreoraithe ag an GD.

Health Education

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action has been taken to improve health education for older people since January 2001. (AQW 1855/01)

Ms de Brún: Older people are included in general health promotion initiatives aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of the population here. Specific initiatives aimed at older people include the "Ageing Well" health promotion programme, "Activate" adult health education programme, the "Keep Warm Keep Well" campaign, the promotion of the flu vaccine for older people and the campaign to prevent accidents to older people.

Cuirtear daoine níos sine san áireamh i dtionscnaimh ghinearálta cur chun cinn sláinte a bhfuil sé mar aidhm acu sláinte agus dea-bhail an phobail anseo a fheabhsú. Is iad na tionscnaimh ar leith atá dírithe ar dhaoine níos sine ná an clár cur chun cinn sláinte "Dul Anonn in Aois go Sláintiúil", "Gríosaigh" clár oideachas sláinte aosach, an feachtas "Bí Teolaí, Bí Folláin", agus cur chun cinn an vacsaín fliú do dhaoine níos sine agus an

feachtas le bac a chur ar thaismí a bhaineann do dhaoine níos sine.

NHS Bursaries

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail NHS bursaries for students studying in Northern Ireland and how they compare with those in England, Scotland and Wales.

(AQW 1858/01)

Ms de Brún: The majority of funding for undergraduate students falls to the Department of Employment and Learning.

My Department funds two types of bursary for students on courses leading to a qualification in one of the recognised health professions:

(1) Non-income assessed:

- (a) Students on nursing and midwifery diploma and pre-registration degree courses at the University of Ulster or Queen's University Belfast are eligible for a flat rate basic maintenance grant of £4925 together with a book and uniform allowance of £160.
- (b) A basic personal allowance of £2,543 (£3,205 if required to live in lodgings) is available for Dental Technology, Dental Nursing and Dental Hygiene courses at the Dental School, Royal Group of Hospitals.

(2) Income assessed:

Available for pre-registration degree courses in Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Radiography, Speech & language Therapy, Podiatry and Dietetics at the University of Ulster. The amount of bursary depends on the student's income and that of their family. The maximum available is £1,945 for students living away from their parents' home and £1,590 if living at their parents' home. (These students are also eligible to apply for a reduced rate non-income assessed loan).

Higher rates of personal allowance are payable to students age 26 or over and additional allowances may be payable for dependants.

Bursary rates are broadly comparable to those payable in England, Scotland and Wales, the main exception is that in England, Scotland and Wales students on Nursing & Midwifery Degree and Dental Auxiliary courses are only eligible for an income assessed bursary.

In addition my Department also provides a discretionary postgraduate bursary scheme for students undertaking the Diploma in Social Work.

Titeann tromlach an mhaoinithe do mhic léinn fochéimithe ar an Roinn Fostaíochta agus Foghlama.

Tugann an Roinn s'agamsa dhá chineál sparántachta do mhic léinn ag déanamh cúrsaí a dtiocfaidh cáilíocht i gceann de na gairmeacha aitheanta sláinte astu: -

(1) Gan ioncam measúnaithe:

- (a) Tá mic léinn ag déanamh dioplóma nó céimeanna réamhchláraithe in altranas agus i gnáimhseachas in Ollscoil Uladh nó in Ollscoil na Banríona, Béal Feirste i dteideal bundeontais chothaithe ar ráta seasta de £4925 chomh maith le leabhar agus le liúntas éide de £160.
- (b) Tá bunliúntas pearsanta de £2,543 (£3,205 más gá dó/di cónaí i lóistín) ar fáil do chúrsaí i dTeicneolaíocht Dhéadach, Altranas Déadach agus i Sláinteachas Déadach sa Scoil Dhéadach in Otharlanna an Ghrúpa Ríoga.

(2) Ioncam-mheasúnaithe:

Ar fáil do chéimeanna réamhchláraithe i bhFisiteiripe, i dTeiripe Saothair, i Radagrafaíocht, i dTeiripe Labhartha agus Teanga, i gCosliacht agus i mBia-eolaíocht in Otharlann Uladh. Braitheann méid na sparántachta ar ioncam an mhic léinn agus a dteaghlaigh. Is é £1,945 an t-uasmhéid atá ar fáil do mhic léinn a chónaíonn i lóistín as teach a dtuismitheoirí agus is é £1,590 atá ar fáil dóibh siúd a chónaíonn i dteach a dtuismitheoirí. (Tá na mic léinn seo i dteideal iarratas a dhéanamh ar iasacht gan ioncam measúnaithe atá ar ráta níos ísle).

Tá na rátaí is airde den liúntas pearsanta iníoctha le mic léinn 26 bliain d'aois nó níos sine agus is féidir go mbeidh liúntais bhreise iníoctha ar pháistí.

Tá rátaí na sparántachtaí comparáideach go ginearálta leo siúd iníoctha i Sasana, in Albain agus sa Bhreatain Bheag, ach is í an phríomhseacht nach bhfuil mic léinn ag déanamh céimeanna in Altranas agus i gCnáimhseachas agus cúrsaí Chúntóirí Déadacha i Sasana, in Albain agus sa Bhreatain Bheag ach i dteideal sparántachta ioncam-mheasúnaithe.

Ina theannta sin, réachtálaíonn an Roinn s'agamsa scéim lánroghnach sparántachta iarchéime fosta do mhic léinn ag déanamh Dioplóma in Obair Shóisialta.

Retirements Amongst GPs

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) projected retirement rates for GPs registered in Northern Ireland in each of the next 5 years and (b) the projected number of newly qualified GPs in each of the next 5 years; and to make a statement. (AQW 1863/01)

Ms de Brún: The number of projected retirements amongst GP principals is anticipated to average 27 per

year. The projected number of newly qualified GPs is expected to be 40 per year.

The future need for General Medical Practitioners is one element of a comprehensive review of future medical workforce requirements which has recently commenced. This review is expected to be completed by the summer of 2002 and will include an assessment of the training places required to meet service needs

Táthar ag súil gurb é 27 sa bhliain an mheánuimhir thuartha príomhdhochtúirí ginearálta a rachaidh ar scor. Táthar ag súil gurb é 40 sa bhliain an mheánuimhir thuartha do DGanna nua-cáilithe.

Is eilimint amháin é den athbhreithniú ar riachtanais mheitheal oibre míochaine sa toadhcháí a cuireadh ar bonn ar na mallaibh an gá le Dochtúirí Ginearálta Míochaine sa toadhcháí. Táthar ar súil go mbeidh an t-athbhreithniú críochnaithe faoi shamhradh 2002 agus istigh ann beidh measúnú ar na háiteanna oiliúna atá de dhíth le freastal ar riachtanais na seirbhíse.

Workload and Financial Pressures in General Practice

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to address the workload and the financial pressures in general practice. (AQW 1864/01)

Ms de Brún: This year there has been significant investment in primary care, with an additional £2 million invested to support the infrastructure of general practice and £2.3 million secured from Executive Programme Funds to be used for modernising the use of information and communications technology in general practice over the next three years. A further £1.5 million for primary care development was devolved to boards.

The money currently used to run the GP Fundholding Scheme and the Commissioning Pilots will be redeployed to meet the cost of the new local health and social care groups. That will allow up to £2.5 million to be diverted from management costs to front-line primary care services when fundholding ends in April this year.

A new General Medical Services contract is currently being negotiated which will address workload issues. It will provide new flexibilities for GPs with better control of workload and substantial rewards for those who provide service users with high quality care.

Bhí infheistíocht mhór i bpríomhchúram i mbliana, le £2 milliún breise infheistithe le tacú le bonneagar gnáthdhochtúireachta agus fuarthas £2.3 milliún ó Chistí Chlár an Fheidhmeannais le húsáid teicneolaíochta eolais agus meánchumarsáide i ngnáthdhochtúireacht a athchóiriú thar na trí bliana seo chugainn. Tugadh £1.5 milliún breise do Bhoird le haghaidh forbartha príomhchúraim.

Athdháilfear an t-airgead úsáidte i láthair na huaire le Scéimeanna Píolótacha Coimisiúnaithe a réachtáil chun costas na ngrúpaí nua áitiúla sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta a sheasamh. Lamhálfaidh sé sin dom suas go £2.5 milliún a aistriú ó chostais bhainistíochta go heochairsheirbhíse príomhchúraim nuair a chuirfear deireadh le ciste-sheilbh in Aibreán na bliana seo.

Tá idirbheartaíocht á déanamh faoi láthair ar chonradh nua Seirbhíse Ginearálta Míochaine a thabharfaidh faoi cheisteanna ualaigh oibre. Tabharfaidh sé seo deiseanna nua do Ghnáthdhochtúirí le láimhseáil níos fearr an ualaigh oibre agus le duaiseanna móra dóibh siúd a sholáthraíonn cúram ardcháilíochta d'úsáideoirí seirbhíse.

Health Service Restrictions

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the restrictions which have been placed on access to (a) gynaecological elective surgery (b) occupational therapy (c) podiatry (d) diabetic clinics (e) orthopaedics (f) neurosurgery and (g) child and adolescent psychiatry throughout Northern Ireland since 1 January 2002.

(AQW 1865/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is set out in the table below.

SERVICE RESTRICTIONS SINCE 1 JANUARY 2002

Service	Restriction
Elective gynaecological surgery	Routine elective surgery suspended during January in the Eastern, Northern and Southern HSS Boards. No restriction in the Western Board.
Occupational Therapy	No restriction
Podiatry	No restriction
Diabetic clinics	No restriction
Orthopaedics	The limited routine elective surgery carried out by acute hospitals in the EHSSB was suspended during January. Suspension did not apply to Musgrave Park Hospital.
Neurosurgery	Non-urgent elective surgery remains suspended. (Suspension dates from Oct 2001).
Child and Adult psychiatry	No restriction

Ta a t-eolas a iarradh leagtha amach sa tabla thíos

SRIANTA SEIRBHÍSE Ó 1 EANÁIR 2002

Seirbhís	Srianadh
Máinliacht chnámheachais roghnach	Cuireadh ar fionraí an ghnáthmháinliacht roghnach in Eanáir i mBord SSS an Oirthir, an Tuaiscirt, an Deiscirt. Srianadh ar bith i mBord an Iarthair.
Teiripe Saothair	Srianadh ar bith
Cosliacht	Srianadh ar bith
Clinicí diaibéiteacha	Srianadh ar bith
Ortaipéidic	Cuireadh ar fionraí an ghnáthmháinliacht roghnach a rinne géarotharlanna I BSSSO in Eanáir. Ní bhain an fhionraíocht le hOtharlann Pháirc Musgrave.
Máinliacht néarógach	Tá máinliacht neamhphráinneach roghnach ar fionraí go fóill (Bhí fionraíocht ann ó Dheireadh Fómhair 2001).
Síciatracht Leanaí agus Aosach	Srianadh ar bith

General Practitioners

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of registered GP's per head of population in Northern Ireland and how does this compare with England and Scotland. (AQW 1868/01)

Ms de Brún: The number of General Practitioners here, per head of population, is 0.00058. Comparable figures for England and Scotland are 0.00051 and 0.00069 respectively. The information shows the Whole Time Equivalent number of General Practitioners providing general medical services and relates to the position at 30 September 2001.

Is é 0.00058 líon na nDochtúirí Ginearálta anseo de réir líon na ndaoine. Is é 0.00051 agus 0.00069 faoi seach a mhachasamhail d'fhigiúirí do Shasain agus d'Albain. Léiríonn an t-eolas líon na nDochtúirí Ginearálta Coibhéise Lánaimeartha ag soláthar seirbhísí ginearálta míochaine agus baineann sé leis an riocht mar atá ar 30 Meán Fómhair 2001.

Secretary of State for Health

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) what personal contact she has had with the Secretary of State for Health and (b) the date of their last meeting.

(AQW 1869/01)

Ms de Brún: I correspond and meet with the Secretary of State for Health as business requires. The most recent meeting was held on 28 January 2002.

Déanaim comhfhreagras leis agus buailim leis an Stát-Rúnaí Sláinte de réir mo ghnáthdualgas. Bhí an cruinniú is déanaí againn ar 28 Eanáir 2002.

MRI Equipment

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that funding already approved for the MRI scanner at the Belfast City Hospital will proceed without delay in the event that the Belfast City Hospital Trust approves the Friends of Montgomery House offer to purchase, install, run and give 5 free sessions a week for scanning cancer patients.

(AQW 1892/01)

Ms de Brún: I have secured a total of £1.8 million from Executive Programme Funds to provide replacement MRI equipment for the Royal Victoria Hospital this year, and for a new unit for Belfast City Hospital next year. This is part of a significant expansion in the provision of MRI in the HPSS over the next 15 months, as part of my Imaging Modernisation Programme, and will make MRI available at every major acute hospital.

The plans for the introduction of the magnetic resonance scanning service at the Belfast City Hospital will be taken forward irrespective of the outcome of the ongoing discussions between the trust and the Friends of Montgomery House.

Fuair mé £1.8 milliún san iomlán ó Chistí Chlár an Fheidhmeannais chun trealamh úrnua ÍAM a sholáthar in Otharlann Ríoga Vichteoiria i mbliana agus chun ionad nua a sholáthar in Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste an bhliain seo chugainn. Tá sé seo mar chuid d'fhairsingiú mór sholáthar ÍAM sna SSSP thar na 15 mí seo chugainn, mar chuid de mo Chlár Athchóiriú Íomhánna, agus cuirfidh sé ÍAM ar fáil i ngach príomhghéarotharlann.

Cuirfear pleananna chun seirbhís scrúdú Athshondais Mhaighnéadaigh a thabhairt isteach in Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste chun cinn beag beann ar thoradh na gcaibidlí atá ag dul ar aghaidh faoi láthair idir an tIontaobhas agus Cairde Theach Montgomery.

MRI Scanner

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has agreed to accept the offer made by the Friends of Montgomery House to purchase, with running costs, an MRI scanner to be located initially at Belvoir Park Hospital.

(AQW 1893/01)

Ms de Brún: The Friends of Montgomery House proposed to meet the initial costs and supply a building to accommodate the scanner. The building would be subsequently gifted to the Belfast City Hospital Trust, but the scanner would remain the property of the Friends who would pay for maintenance costs.

The Friends' proposal to sell access to the equipment to the trust on the basis of a fixed monthly charge, with ongoing revenue commitments, would have direct resource implications and would require the support of the health and social services boards as commissioners.

Over the next 15 months, there will be a significant expansion in the provision of MRI in the HPSS with five new scanners and a replacement for the RVH coming on stream as part of my Imaging Modernisation Programme. In the context of this additional provision I am not convinced that additional MRI provision would be a priority. I understand that the trust has been in discussion with the Friends of Montgomery House on the possibility of an alternative proposal.

Bhí sé molta ag cairde Montgomery na costais tosaigh a íoc agus foirgneamh a chur ar fáil don scanóir. Bheadh an foirgneamh bronnta ar Iontaobhas Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste ina dhiaidh, ach ba leis na Cairde an scanóir go fóill a d'íocfadh as costais chothabhála.

Bheadh impleachtaí díreacha acmhainní leis an mholadh de chuid Cairde le rochtain ar an trealamh a dhíol bunaithe ar táille gearrtha ar bhonn míosúil, mar aon le gealltanais leanúnacha ioncaim, agus bheadh tacaíocht na mBord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí mar choimisinéirí de dhíth.

Le linn na chéad 15 mí eile beidh leathnú suntasach ar sholáthar MRI sna SSSP le Cúig scanóir nua agus athsholáthar ann don ORV ag teacht ar bord mar chuid den Chlár um Iomháu a Nuachóiriú Sa chomhthéacs sin ní chreidim gur tosaíocht é soláthar breise MRI. Tuigim gur phléigh an tIontaobhas féidearthacht moltaí malartacha le Cairde Theach Montgomery.

Independent Review Panel

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment can she make in relation to the powers in place to implement the recommendations of the Independent Review Panel on patients' complaints about GPs.
(AQW 1896/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the member to my answer to AQW 1627/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 1627/01.

Private Practice: Waiting Lists

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment has she made in the relationship of Health Service waiting lists to the extent of private practices of consultants; and (b) what plans she has to address the situation.
(AQW 1898/01)

Ms de Brún: I have made no assessment of the relationship between the extent of private practice and waiting lists.

Ní dharna mé measúnú ar an ghaol idir a fhairsinge a bhí cleachtadh príobháideach agus liostaí feithimh.

Intensive Care Beds: Patients Transferred Between Hospitals

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by health board, the number of patients requiring an intensive care bed that have been transferred between hospitals in order to obtain an available bed in each of the last 5 years.
(AQW 1907/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not readily available in the form requested and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil go toilteanach san fhoirm a iarradh é agus ní féidir é a fháil ach ar chostas díreireach.

Treatment Outside the UK

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if any NHS patients facing a long waiting list for surgery will be given the option of treatment elsewhere in the EU.
(AQW 1908/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQO 773/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQO 773/01.

Local Health and Social Care Groups

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what responsibilities will the new local Health and Social Care Groups hold.
(AQW 1909/01)

Ms de Brún: LHSCGs will be responsible for exploring ways of improving and expanding local primary care services and for contributing to the planning and commissioning of Health and Social Services currently carried out by the boards. From April 2003, some groups are expected to be in a position to take on the

additional responsibility of managing budgets for commissioning some services. Initially the groups will be responsible for managing budgets for prescribing and for the development and delivery of primary care services.

Beidh GCÁSSÍ freagrach as dóigheanna a scrúdú le seirbhísí áitiúla príomhchúraim a fheabhsú agus a fhairsingiú áfach móide as cur le planáil agus as coimisiúnú Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta, déanta faoi láthair ag na Boird. Ó Aibreán 2003, táthar ag súil go mbeidh roinnt grúpaí réidh an fhreagracht bhreise a ghlacadh orthu féin as stiúradh buiséad do choimisúnaí roinnt seirbhísí. Ar dtús, beidh na Grúpaí freagrach as stiúradh buiséad le haghaidh leagan amach, forbairt agus soláthar seirbhísí príomhchúraim.

Crossroad Carers: Hourly Rate

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to increase the hourly rate for Crossroad Carers in the Southern Board area. (AQW 1926/01)

Ms de Brún: The rates for contracted service provision is a matter for negotiation between Crossroads and relevant Health and Social Services Trusts.

Is ábhar idirbheartaíochta idir Crossroads agus na hIontaobhais chúí Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta iad na rátaí do sholáthar conraithe seirbhísí.

Aftercare Packages for Patients: Funding

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by health trust, the amount of funding allocated to aftercare packages for patients, over the past year. (AQW 1927/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil san fhoirm a iarradh é.

Crossroad Carers: Redundancy

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any steps she will be taking in respect of the possible redundancy of Crossroad Carers in the Southern Board area. (AQW 1928/01)

Ms de Brún: Redundancy issues are a matter for Crossroads. It will be for the relevant Health and Social Services Trusts within the Southern Board to ensure that the needs of those currently in receipt of Crossroads' services are met by alternative service provision. The implications of such a move are currently unquantified,

but the Trusts hope to reallocate any continuing workload within their existing arrangements.

Is ceist do Crossroads í ceisteanna dífhostaithe. Na hIontaobhais chúí Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta laistigh den Bhord Dheisceartach a chinnteoidh go riarfaidh soláthar eile seirbhísí ar riachtanais iad siúd a úsáideann seirbhísí Crossroads i láthair na huaire. Tá impleachtaí a leithéide de ghníomh seo neamhchinníochtaí faoi láthair, ach tá súil ag na hIontaobhais ualach leanúnach oibre ar bith a athroinnt faoina socruithe reatha.

CCTV: Everton Complex

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if her Department took the decision to reject the installation of CCTV in the grounds of the North and West Health and Social Services Trust's Everton Complex; and to make a statement. (AQW 1965/01)

Ms de Brún: Health and social services facilities are neutral locations. The installation of security equipment at the Everton Centre would have compromised this neutrality in a very direct way and would have put at risk the safety of service users and staff. I conveyed my views that it would be inappropriate to install such equipment there to Jane Kennedy, the Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office.

Is suímh neodracha iad áiseanna seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta. Tíocfadh cur isteach trealamh slándála ag Ionad Everton salach ar an neodracht seo ar bhealach díreach agus chuirfeadh sé sábháilteacht úsáideoirí agus foireann seirbhíse i mbaol. Nocht mé mo bharúil do Jane Kennedy, Aire Stáit ag Oifig Thuaisceart Éireann nár chúí é a leithéid de threalamh a chur isteach ansin.

Muckamore Abbey Hospital's Swimming Pool

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will provide financial support for the refurbishment of Muckamore Abbey Hospital's swimming pool.

(AQW 2075/01)

Ms de Brún: I understand that the cost of refurbishing the pool has been met by North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust, with support from the Sports Council Lottery Funds. The pool is expected to re-open in 2003.

Tuigim gur íoc Iontaobhas Seirbhísí Sóisialta Bhéal Feirste Thuaidh agus Thiar as costais athchóirithe na linne, le tacaíocht ó Chistí Crannchuir na Comhairle Spóirt. Táthar ag súil go n-athosclófar an linn i 2003.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Regional Transportation Strategy

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development what key stakeholders were consulted for the proposed Regional Transportation Strategy.

(AQW 1825/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): My Department has consulted widely throughout the development of the proposed Regional Transportation Strategy. It would be impractical to list all of the individuals and groups that have been consulted. However, all elected representatives in Northern Ireland as well as interested groups and parties have been, and continue to be, afforded the opportunity to participate in the development of the strategy. Those consulted include the organisations listed in my Department's published Equality Scheme.

The consultation to date has included:

- An initial paper on the development of the strategy issued to over 700 stakeholders in January 2001. Around 140 written responses were received and 77 meetings were held with representative groups and interested parties;
- A survey of 2,000 households was conducted and 12 focus group meetings held across the region;
- Over 200 stakeholders participated in the Regional Transportation Strategy working conference in September 2001.
- The Proposed Strategy has issued to over 1,000 stakeholders since its launch on 4 February 2002.

Lists of participants in the previous strands of consultation, who have given permission for their details to be made available, is also available on the Regional Transportation Strategy website at www.drdni.gov.uk/rts. I will make a copy of that list available in the Assembly Library.

Rural Transport

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of rural community buses currently operating in each constituency.

(AQW 1826/01)

Mr P Robinson: Under the Rural Transport fund my Department currently supports 16 Rural Community Transport Partnerships who provide transport services in the rural community. The table below details the vehicles available to each partnership and the Assembly

constituencies that equate in the main with their areas of operation.

Rural Community Transport Partnership	Base location	No. Vehicles available	Assembly constituencies covered by Partnership
Down District Accessible Transport	Downpatrick	4	South Down
Age Concern Transport	Newcastle	1	South Down
Rural Lift	Belcoo	2	Fermanagh South Tyrone.
Roe Valley Rural Transport	Limavady	6	East Londonderry
Coleraine Area Rural Transport	Kilrea	1	East Londonderry
North Antrim Community Transport	Ballycastle	3	North Antrim East Antrim
Fermanagh & South Tyrone Rural Transport	Irvinestown	3	Fermanagh South Tyrone. West Tyrone
Down Armagh Rural Transport	Lurgan	7	Lagan Valley Upper Bann South Down
Peninsula Community Transport	Kircubbin	3	Strangford
Armagh Rural Transport	Armagh	1	Newry & Armagh
Dungannon & District Community Transport	Dungannon	4	Fermanagh South Tyrone. Mid Ulster
Mid Tyrone Accessible Community Transport	Carrickmore	2	Mid Ulster West Tyrone
Out and About Community Transport	Magherafelt	1	Mid Ulster
Cookstown Rural Community Transport	Cookstown	2	Mid Ulster
Strabane District Transport Partnership	Strabane	2	West Tyrone
Foyle Connect	Kilaloo	1	Foyle

Road Infrastructure: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development to give an update on the plans for improvement of the road infrastructure in West Tyrone.(AQW 1888/01)

Mr P Robinson: Subsequent to your earlier Written Assembly Question (AQW 54/01) which my predecessor answered on 27 September 2001, I can advise that:

- work on the Newtown Stewart Bypass scheme (estimated cost £8 million) is progressing in line with programme and it is anticipated that the new road will be open to traffic in early 2003;
- work on the Strabane Bypass scheme (estimated cost £4.2 million) commenced in January 2002 and is expected to take 15 months to complete;
- progress continues to be made on the statutory procedures for the Omagh Throughpass scheme (estimated cost £5 million) and it is expected that these could be completed by 2003. Further advancement of the scheme to the construction programme will be dependent on the availability of funds at that time; and
- a number of other major works schemes in West Tyrone are currently being considered for possible inclusion in the Roads Service 10-Year Forward Planning Schedule which I hope to publish later this year.

As regards minor works schemes, good progress is being made in implementing a package of works (now estimated to cost £700,000) in the current year. In particular, the following works are underway:

- an improvement scheme on the A32 at Tummery, Lettergash; and
- the construction of an additional lane to provide improved overtaking opportunities on the A5 at Tattykeel.

You will also be aware that my Department has recently published a Proposed Regional Transportation Strategy which considers strategic transportation priorities over the next 10 years.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Closing Orders

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many Closing Orders have been made on Housing Executive dwellings in the Ards Borough Council area in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 1852/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): There were no Closing Orders made on Housing Executive dwellings during the period in question, however, I have set out below the Closing Orders made in relation to all properties.

1999	11
2000	8
2001	0

Community Care Grants

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any plans he may have to increase the budget for Community Care Grants in each Assembly Constituency. (AQW 1870/01)

Mr Dodds: Details of the overall Community Care Grants budget for Northern Ireland are placed in the Assembly Library at the beginning of the financial year. There are no plans to increase the current year's budget.

Community Care Grants

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the formula for the allocation of funds for Community Care Grant in each Assembly constituency. (AQW 1871/01)

Mr Dodds: The formula used to distribute the Community Care Grant budget in Northern Ireland is similar to Great Britain and is based on a number of factors including historical data on levels of expenditure, type of client groups and levels of unmet demand for Community Care Grants. Details of each district's allocation were placed in the assembly library at the start of the financial year.

Community Care Grants

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the level of funding set aside for the Community Care Grant by Assembly constituency and (b) the uptake. (AQW 1872/01)

Mr Dodds: Figures on the level of funding and uptake are not available on an Assembly constituency basis. The Northern Ireland Community Care Grants budget for the current financial year is £10.26 million and to date just over 43,000 applications have been received.

Benefit Fraud

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on the level of social security benefit fraud. (AQW 1876/01)

Mr Dodds: I regard the current level of social security fraud as totally unacceptable, and I am determined to tackle this abuse with vigour. The Social Security Agency has developed a comprehensive strategy that aims to tackle fraud across all fronts. Stretching reduction targets have been set to focus effort on reducing both the levels of fraud and error within the benefit systems and limit the amount of public money lost. The agency

also aims to increase the level of prosecutions for social security fraud and this is being achieved.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the number of people in receipt of Disability Living Allowance.

(AQW 1879/01)

Mr Dodds: The number of people receiving Disability Living Allowance is 143,731, and is detailed by Parliamentary Constituency in the table below.

The figures provided are the most recent available and are for November 2001.

THE FIGURES PROVIDED ARE THE MOST RECENT AVAILABLE AND ARE FOR NOVEMBER 2001.

Parliamentary Constituency	Disability Living Allowance Recipients
Belfast East	6,326
Belfast North	10,954
Belfast South	6,290
Belfast West	14,447
East Antrim	5,066
East Londonderry	5,425
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	6,812
Foyle	11,392
Lagan Valley	6,024
Mid Ulster	7,574
North Antrim	5,949
North Down	4,317
Newry and Armagh	9,470
South Antrim	6,512
South Down	8,331
Strangford	6,019
Upper Bann	9,547
West Tyrone	9,700
Invalid Postcodes	3,576
Total	143,731

1. In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to wards on the basis of their postcode.
2. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.
3. Past investigation has demonstrated that misallocations and non-allocations do not necessarily occur randomly between areas, and at ward level, the proportion of records misallocated or unallocated can be substantial.
4. At present, it seems likely that a higher than average proportion of the records that cannot be attributed to a ward are in the following areas: Fermanagh District Council, Derry District Council and parts of Belfast City Council.

New Deal 25+

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what measures he will take to assist the long term unemployed into work in West Tyrone.

(AQW 1889/01)

Mr Dodds: The New Deal for 25+ is part of the Government's Welfare to Work programme and targets people aged 25 and over who have been unemployed for 18 months or more. In Northern Ireland, the lead responsibility for this initiative is with the Department for Employment and Learning. The Department for Social Development assists the Department for Employment and Learning with the identification of those jobseekers that are eligible for New Deal 25+.

The Social Security Agency and Department for Employment & Learning are working together to deliver a joined-up benefit and job broking service for all jobseekers, including the long-term unemployed. Under the new arrangements jobseekers will be offered help to search for job vacancies when they visit the new co-located offices each fortnight to claim benefit.

In order to deliver the new service, the Social Security Office and the Jobcentre need to be co-located in the same building, mostly in Social Security Offices. Starting later this month, the new service will begin rolling out, with all offices due to be implemented by around mid-2004. It is expected that the new service for jobseekers will be implemented in Omagh in early 2003 and in Strabane by Spring 2004.

Help for Pensioners Hospitalised for More Than 6 Weeks

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline any additional (a) financial; and (b) practical help which can be offered to pensioners who are in hospital for more than six weeks.

(AQW 1915/01)

Mr Dodds: After six weeks in hospital, a person with a standard basic rate pension receives £58 a week, or £44.20 if he has no dependants. Housing Benefit, if entitlement exists, remains in payment for a person on Income Support, for others it is reassessed.

Community Care Grants may be available to help with fares for other members of a patient's family to enable them to visit him in hospital.

Students: Benefits Due to Illness

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if he is prepared to support changing the Income Support (General) Regulations NI 1987 Regulations 4ZA and Schedule 1B, to award benefit to students

who have temporarily left their course due to illness or injury. (AQW 1918/01)

Mr Dodds: Students who are sick for more than 28 weeks may be entitled to Income Support if they satisfy the incapacity test. Students who have suspended their studies because of illness, and who are required to wait for a period until they are permitted to rejoin their course, can claim Jobseeker's Allowance and Housing Benefit from the date when they recover from illness.

There are no plans to change these rules.

Full-Time Carers: Pensions

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to provide full-time carers with pensions. (AQW 1920/01)

Mr Dodds: From 6 April 2002, State Second Pension reforms the State Earnings Related Pension Scheme and will allow qualifying carers to build up an additional pension for the first time. Qualifying carers who look after a young child or a sick or disabled person at home will be treated for additional pension purposes as if they had annual earnings of £10,800. This figure will be reviewed annually in line with the general level of earnings.

Private Pension Provision

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what targets he has to increase private pension provision. (AQW 1921/01)

Mr Dodds: My Department is committed to encouraging private saving, by those who can afford to do so, to meet the long-term challenges of an ageing population. Stakeholder pensions have been introduced as a secure and value-for-money vehicle to enable more people to take out a private pension. My Department is also taking part in the UK-wide simplification review which aims to reduce the layers of regulation which increase the costs of private pensions while still safeguarding members' pensions. The proposed State Pension Credit will ensure that pensioners with modest savings or other income, for example, from a private pension will be rewarded for their prudence. The ongoing pensions education campaign is driving home the message that saving now is the best way to guarantee financial security in the future

Community Care Grants

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the criteria for awarding Community Care Grants for (a) low priority items; and (b) medium priority items, per constituency. (AQW 1924/01)

Mr Dodds: The criteria used to decide Community Care Grants is the same throughout Northern Ireland. Decision-makers in determining an award take into account a range of factors including qualifying conditions, levels of priority that an application merits and the funds available at the time.

Benefits and Supplementary Payments to Fishermen

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development if he will undertake to ensure trawler owners and sea fishermen are made aware of the full range of benefits and supplementary payments they can claim during the EU enforced three-month closure period. (AQW 2015/01)

Mr Dodds: My officials have been in contact with the chief executive and representatives of the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation, and have given them assurances that all practical help will be provided by the Social Security Agency. Assistance will be available to those directly affected by the Cod Recovery Plan and claims to benefit will be given the appropriate priority.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Cost of Visits Outside NI

Mr Weir asked the Assembly Commission to detail the total expenditure by the Commission on visits by representatives of the Assembly outside Northern Ireland in each of the last three years. (AQW 2161/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mrs E Bell): It is unclear whether your request for information on expenditure by the Assembly Commission relates to elected Members and/or Assembly Officials. Notwithstanding that, the Assembly Secretariat does not hold this information centrally and it is the Commission's view that the cost of collating such information is disproportionate.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 1 March 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND THE DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Consultancy Costs

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how much money it has spent on external consultants and consultancy reports in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1941/01)

Reply: The amount of money spent by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on external consultants and consultancy reports in each of the last three years is as follows:

1999/2000	£199,388.91
2000/2001	£394,980.18
2001/2002	£352,692.07

The figure for 1999/2000 represents the cost amount spent after 2 December 1999 i.e. the period since devolution.

The figure for 2001/2002 records expenditure up to 21 February 2002.

Study on Obstacles to Cross Border Mobility

Mr M Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the cost of the study of obstacles to mobility undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers on behalf of the North-South Ministerial Council. (AQW 2046/01)

Reply: The costs of the Study on Obstacles to Cross Border Mobility, carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers on behalf of the North South Ministerial Council, were borne by the North South Ministerial Council Joint Secretariat, the Department of Foreign Affairs and our department. The apportioned costs falling to the devolved administration amount to £41,000. This sum covers the initial project definition document, progress and final reports and professional fees.

Townland Names

Mrs Carson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how it is encouraging the use of townland names in written communications. (AQW 2052/01)

Reply: Our department's policy is to use townland names when replying to correspondents who include this information in their addresses.

Late Answers

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 1996/01, to detail statistics of percentages of answers to questions provided outside the specified period in this session for each of the other Departments. (AQW 2162/01)

Reply: Our department does not hold this information.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

NIAPA

Mr Kane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if the outcome of the Wool Board elections provide sufficient reason for her to reconsider the Department's acceptance of NIAPA's Ruling Council as bona fide leaders of the organisation. (AQW 1951/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): As I said in my Answer to the Member on 7 January, the elections to which he refers are entirely a matter for NIAPA. I am content that my relationship with the organisation is satisfactory.

Environmental Studies

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what guidelines are in place for environmental studies enabling farmers to qualify for Government subsidies. (AQW 1964/01)

Ms Rodgers: The three Northern Ireland agri- environment schemes are the Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) Scheme, Countryside Management Scheme (CMS) and Organic Farming Scheme (OFS).

Some 4,700 applicants have joined the ESA Scheme in the last 12 years. Over 400 applicants have joined the CMS since it opened in 1999, and a further 700 are expected to join this within the next few months. There are also currently 72 participants in the OFS.

Entry into these schemes, which are designed to reward participant farmers for responsible management of the countryside, is voluntary. Under the terms of each scheme, participants receive annual payments for the management of their holding in accordance with Scheme prescriptions. These payments are calculated on the basis of the additional costs and income foregone in complying with the appropriate Scheme requirements and prescriptions.

There are no specific grants available to encourage farmers to join these schemes. However my Department provides a range of promotional, information and education programmes for potential and actual scheme participants.

The ESA and CMS schemes are promoted through a range of measures, including:

Department Publications - promotional literature on the ESA and CMS is available from DARD Headquarters and all local Agricultural Offices;

Press articles/Television/Radio interviews - press articles, television and radio interviews were used to promote the ESA and CMS schemes when introduced;

Public meetings - when the ESA schemes were first launched in 1988, a series of farmers' meetings were held to provide information on the newly introduced scheme;

Information/education programmes for existing agri-environment scheme participants - these include information sheets for each habitat, farm demonstrations/walks, Newsletters providing regular update on changes/progress of scheme, training programmes on, for example, hedge restoration, stonewalling and management of ancient monuments; and

Staff from DARD's **Countryside Management Division** can be contacted by farmers for advice at the local agricultural offices and during on-farm visits.

The Organic Farming Scheme has been promoted through a range of measures, including: -

Business Management Programme, which includes the Northern Ireland Organic Conversion and Information Service. Farmers have telephone access to the organic development advisers based at Greenmount College and can seek advice on organic production and technical and business assistance associated with conversion planning.

Three **Organic Development Groups** have been formed and are facilitated by DARD organic development advisers: the Organic Dairy Group, Organic Vegetable Group, and Organic Beef and Sheep Group. Members meet regularly to discuss common interests. An organic bulletin is produced and circulated quarterly to members and others in the agri-food industry with an interest in organic production.

Promotional activities, literature and other publications: this has included displays at Balmoral Show, the Winter Fair and the Farmer's Market in Belfast. DARD staff produce a series of press articles throughout the year, and a series of 17 advisory leaflets on organic production and a booklet on the Organic Farming Scheme are available from the DARD organic development team.

Education and training, which includes a popular short course 'Introduction to Organic Production'. On-going training events are available to organic producers and others interested in conversion, for example, homeopathy, parasite control in organic livestock, management of clover swards, etc.

Regulations Governing Meat Imports

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the progress her Department has made in reforming the regulations governing meat imports; and to make a statement.

(AQW 1973/01)

Ms Rodgers: At the outset of FMD, in February 2001 the Department adopted the policy with respect to trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland similar to that which the EU requested between Great Britain and any other Member State in that all imports of meat were subject to additional FMD controls in line with the relevant EC Decisions.

However, as a result of the OIE decision on 21 January 2002 to recognise UK FMD freedom and the improving situation, an amendment has been made to Commission Decision 2001/740/EC which will relax trade control measures between Great Britain and the rest of the European Union.

In conjunction with my officials, I am currently reviewing the full range of FMD controls, which were put in place in Northern Ireland. I will announce any decision on these matters as soon as the deliberations and consultations with the relevant stakeholders are completed.

Fur Farming

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she plans to publish draft legislation to outlaw fur farming. (AQW 1979/01)

Ms Rodgers: It is planned to publish a draft Bill to ban fur farming in Northern Ireland in March.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to list all Non-Departmental Public Bodies

under her control, and to advise if they follow guidance on reporting fraud to the Comptroller and Auditor General, as required under Government Accounting procedures.

(AQW 1980/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has responsibility for the following NDPBs:

- (i) Agricultural Research Institute of Northern Ireland
- (ii) Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority
- (iii) Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland
- (iv) Pig Production Development Committee
- (v) Agricultural Wages Board for Northern Ireland
- (vi) Drainage Council for Northern Ireland

Guidance on reporting fraud to the Comptroller and Auditor General has been issued to the NDPBs listed at (i) to (iii) above. These NDPBs follow that guidance. The Pig Production Development Committee (iv above) is in a different position in that it does not receive any public funds and is wholly funded by the pig industry. It is also supplied with the guidance. However, in accordance with the Pig Production Development Act (NI) 1964, the Pig Production Development Fund is audited by a private sector company auditor.

The Department does not consider that compliance with the guidance is applicable for the remaining two NDPBs as they do not administer funds.

Sheep Exports Preceding Foot-and-Mouth Disease

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many live sheep were exported from Northern Ireland in the preceding 12 months before the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, for which figures are available.

(AQW 1981/01)

Ms Rodgers: Please see below a summary of Sheep Exports from Northern Ireland between 1 January 2000 and 28 February 2001.

Description	Belgium	UK
Sheep for breeding	6	59879
Sheep for fattening		31194
Sheep for slaughter		9338

No data is provided for sheep to the ROI because prior to FMD, inspection and health certification did not apply in respect of the export to or the import from the ROI of any sheep and goats. This was in line with the derogation provided for in Article 12 of Council directive 91/68/EEC.

Conservation of Fish Stocks

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the impact of conservation measures for fish stocks in Northern Ireland waters.

(AQW 2002/01)

Ms Rodgers: Over the years a wide range of conservation measures have been introduced with a view to assisting the conservation of fish stocks. These range from local measures to assist the conservation of scallops to the wide ranging Council Regulation (EC) No 850/98, as amended for the conservation of fishery resources through technical measures for the protection of juveniles of marine organisms. Whilst it is not possible to quantify the overall effect these measures have had it is worth noting that in respect of the specific measures that have been taken to assist the recovery of cod stocks in the Irish Sea, based on scientific advice it was possible to have the Total Allowable Catch for this stock increased from 2100 tonnes in 2001 to 3200 tonnes in 2002.

EU Support to Rural Communities

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what support is given by the European Commission to rural communities in disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2002/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2001 to 2006 is co-funded by the EU.

The value of the Programme over the period from 2001 to 2006 will be in the order of £80 million, and I anticipate that this support will lever additional private and public funds bringing a total investment of around £100 million.

The Programme will focus on disadvantage and, in particular, will encourage input and uptake by rural women, young people, farm families and the long term unemployed.

The key elements of the Programme are:

- Capacity Building (strengthening rural communities);
- Local Regeneration Projects and Programmes;
- Sectoral and Area Based Development Projects and Programmes;
- Micro-business development; and
- Natural Resource Rural Tourism

In addition to the support provided under the Rural Development Programme, some £200 million of EU-funded direct payments are made to farmers throughout Northern Ireland each year. These payments also provide significant support to many people living in rural areas.

Ministerial Visits

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount spent on Ministerial visits outside Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2095/01)

Ms Rodgers: The amount spent on Ministerial visits outside Northern Ireland since 2 December 1999 is as follows:

Financial Year	Amount Spent
1999/00 (From 2 December)	£ 5,321.07
2000/01	£28,325.12
2001/02 (To date)	£18,267.71

Townland Names

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how she has encouraged the use of townland names in written communications. (AQW 2121/01)

Ms Rodgers: The practice within my Department is to use the town land address where this information has been used by the correspondent. Any change to an address would be the addition of a postcode where omitted.

Persons Lost at Sea: Royal Navy Support

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what conditions are needed to secure the support of the Royal Navy to search for fishermen lost at sea. (AQW 2146/01)

Ms Rodgers: Following the report of persons lost at sea HM Coastguard co-ordinates a search and rescue operation. The Coastguard in the area concerned may utilise vessels, including the Royal Navy, and other air/sea resources in the search to save life. The search and rescue operation will be called off, and air/sea resources stood down, when it has been determined that all life would be extinct.

Thereafter the Marine Accident Investigation Branch of the Department of Transport Local Government and the Regions takes responsibility for the investigation of serious incidents, including the loss of life, for UK flagged vessels. The MAIB does not have the remit to recover bodies nor does it have the resources to find or recover vessels.

However it is possible for the Department of Transport Local Government and the Regions to obtain Royal Navy resources to assist in the search for a missing vessel. This was done in the case of the missing Tullaghmurray Lass, as a result of my intervention with the DLTR Minister and following a plea for help from the

Greene family from Kilkeel, to continue the search for 3 family members on board the Tullaghmurray Lass.

Persons Lost at Sea: Underwater Equipment

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps is she taking to have in place a strategy for the use of underwater equipment to search for those lost at sea. (AQW 2147/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department does not have responsibility for the deployment of underwater equipment to search for those lost at sea.

HM Coastguard, on receipt of a report of person(s) lost at sea, will initiate and co-ordinate a search and rescue operation. As was the case in the recent search for the Tullaghmurray Lass and its crew of 3 members of the Greene family from Kilkeel, I authorised the participation of the Department's Fishery Protection Vessel, the Ken Vickers, in that operation. The Ken Vickers has facilities to search with sonar and under such circumstances I was more than happy for them to be used in the search. In the unfortunate event of a future incident involving fishermen missing at sea, I would readily offer the facilities at my disposal to help in the search once I was assured by my officials that conditions did not present an unacceptable risk to the safety of personnel involved.

The responsibility for search at sea lies with the Department of Transport Local Government and the Regions and is a reserved matter. In the case of the Tullaghmurray Lass, I exercised my role as Northern Ireland Fisheries Minister to intercede, on behalf of the Greene family, with DLTR at Ministerial level to seek the deployment of all available resources to continue the search for those family members lost at sea.

Agricultural Grants

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail grant aid available to assist farmers singly or in groups to improve the quality of produce and to better manage farm waste. (AQW 2171/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Northern Ireland Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity (BSP) includes a measure providing for the payment of non-capital support to those engaged in the marketing of produce of agriculture or the products derived from such produce.

The aim is to encourage greater integration and collaboration between producers, processors and others in the food chain to produce and market quality products, to improve competitiveness through better marketing and to increase exports of quality products.

The scheme, which is due to open for applications during March 2002, is open to a wide range of those involved in the agri-food industry including individual producers or others wishing to set up a procurement group, groups of collaborating producers, food processors and industry bodies. Grants will cover the cost of projects and will be based on 50% of eligible expenditure subject to a maximum of £150,000.

As you may recall, £6.1 million has been allocated from Executive Programme Funds for a targeted Farm Waste Management Scheme. The proposed Scheme is aimed at minimising farm source pollution, which is contributing to water quality problems. It will give capital assistance towards repair projects to slurry tanks which are considered as being able to deliver a beneficial reduction in the risk of effluent escaping into watercourses.

My Department is currently engaged with the Department of Environment's Environment and Heritage Service in establishing those rivers, tributaries or head-water catchments that are most in need of remedial action, and where pollution from agricultural sources is considered to be the greatest contributory factor.

It is anticipated that some 1,500 farmers will benefit initially from this Scheme. It is hoped, subject to the Scheme receiving favourable uptake and achieving its objectives, that it could be extended to further catchments in subsequent years as funding provision permits.

However, before the Scheme can be formally announced, my Department must obtain State Aids approval from the EU Commission, and whilst this work is at an advanced stage, I am not yet in a position to give a definitive date for the opening of the Scheme.

I will, of course, be advising the Assembly Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development in due course of plans to prepare the necessary legislation to enable the scheme to open.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list all Non-Departmental Public Bodies under her control, and to advise if they follow guidance on reporting fraud to the Comptroller and Auditor General, as required under Government Accounting procedures.

(AQW 1982/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The NDPBs for which my Department has responsibility are as follows:

- Armagh Observatory
- Armagh Planetarium

- Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI)
- Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB)
- Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB)
- Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI)
- North-Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB)
- Northern Ireland Events Company
- Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC)
- South-Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB)
- Southern Education and Library Board (SELB)
- Sports Council for Northern Ireland (SCNI)
- Western Education and Library Board (WELB)

All of these NDPBs have been advised to implement the guidance on reporting fraud to the C&AG as required under Government Accounting Procedures:

- Chapter 37 of Government Accounting Northern Ireland (GANI).
- DAO (DFP) 5/96 Notification of Frauds.
- Management of Risk – A Strategic Overview – HM Treasury – January 2001.

Motorsport

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what progress has been made in the promotion and development of a motorsport facility within Northern Ireland. (AQW 2039/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland has overall responsibility for the promotion and development of sport in Northern Ireland. The Sports Council has recently been working closely with the Governing Bodies of Motorsport, namely the Motorcycle Racing Association, the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland and the Association of Northern Car Clubs, on a Strategic Plan for 2 and 4 wheeled motorsports.

It is anticipated that this Strategic Plan, which will shortly be subjected to public consultation, will map out the Governing Bodies' vision for the sport's future, and include facility provision for the promotion, development and future sustainability of each sport. It is anticipated that this planning process will be completed by April. This Strategic Plan will provide the backdrop against which the Sports Council will further consider the future of motorsport facility provision in the province.

HM The Queen's Golden Jubilee: Poetry Competition

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how he has promoted the Poetry Competition celebrating HM The Queen's Golden Jubilee in schools.

(AQW 2053/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Golden Jubilee Schools Poetry Competition was launched in October 2001 at Buckingham Palace by the Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion. I attended the launch with a representative group of teachers from across Northern Ireland. Local press releases were issued from my office, subsequent to this visit.

Buckingham Palace has issued the application forms and posters directly to the schools, including those in Northern Ireland, and entries are to be returned to the Palace. My Department's Golden Jubilee Unit has acted as a point of contact for Northern Ireland schools. As such, a reminder of the closing date of 31 March for the competition has been forwarded to the Department of Education for circulation to all schools.

My Department has also been active in circulating information about the competition to Lord Lieutenants, the Local Government Golden Jubilee Forum and other organisations which they have briefed about the Jubilee. It is one of a number of national activities which is being organised for the Golden Jubilee, and the Department has regularly updated these groups on arrangements for celebrating the Golden Jubilee.

Ministerial Visits

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount spent on Ministerial visits outside Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years.
(AQW 2096/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The details which include all expenses incurred by officials travelling with me (Permanent Secretary, Private Secretary, Press Officer and Departmental officials) are as follows:

1999	£0 - no visits outside Northern Ireland
2000	£1,460.84
2001	£27,636.71

Decentralisation of Jobs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of personnel currently employed within his department and how many of these jobs may be decentralised between January and December 2002.
(AQW 2111/01)

Mr McGimpsey: There are currently 389 non-industrial and industrial staff employed by the Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure. There are no current plans to decentralise between January and December 2002.

A Strategic Review of Civil Service Office Accommodation, which includes an examination of the scope for decentralisation of Civil Service jobs, is currently ongoing. Pending the outcome of the review, opportunities to relocate Civil Service jobs will continue to

be examined on a case by case basis, as particular needs and issues arise. Where there are considered to be pressing accommodation needs or where short-term decisions are required, business cases are prepared taking full account of the current relocation policy.

HM The Queen's Golden Jubilee: Funding Applications

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure would he consider extending the closing date for funding applications for HM The Queen's Golden Jubilee celebrations.
(AQW 2148/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure released notification of two rounds of non lottery funding for the Golden Jubilee celebrations in November last. This information was circulated to community groups, schools, churches and network organisations offering a small grant of £500 to £5000 to groups organising events to celebrate the Golden Jubilee.

It was stated in the Assembly on 19 February, that 258 applications for the second round of non lottery funding have been received and are being processed. The amount of money which has been applied for is nearly 6 times the amount of money which is available in the budget. Therefore, until the assessment exercise is complete, I will not be in a position to judge whether another round of funding would be appropriate.

The early closing date ensures that events which are planned for June have been adequately organised. However, the Lottery scheme Awards for All will accept applications for Golden Jubilee projects, provided they fit the existing criteria. This is an ongoing grants scheme. Some Councils will also make funds available for groups wishing to host a Golden Jubilee event.

The important feature of this occasion, as I stated in the Assembly, is that it is not about money. People want to celebrate, whether they get a grant or not and they will do so. The Jubilee is about small events, people coming together and celebrating and a sense of community. The grants scheme in itself will not be an indicator of how many events take place. Ultimately there will be far more events than awards, because that type of enthusiasm is in the province.

HM The Queen's Golden Jubilee Celebrations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) the total amount of funding for HM The Queen's Golden Jubilee celebrations; and (b) the amount that has been awarded to date.
(AQW 2149/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure secured a budget of £200k for Golden Jubilee celebrations in the year 2001/02. This budget funds only grants and administrative costs.

In the first round of funding which closed at the end of November, 11 applications were received, and the Golden Jubilee Advisory Panel have agreed to support 10 of these applications, which meet the criteria laid down for assessment. Approximately £24k has been allocated in Round 1.

A further 258 applications were received for the second round which closed on 1 February and these totalled nearly £800,000. These applications are now being assessed and until they are completed, and the Golden Jubilee Advisory Group has had an opportunity to consider them, it is not possible to say what the total allocation will be for the second round.

However, as I said in my statement to the Assembly on 19 February, I am prepared to seek additional funding to support the applications which the Department has received.

EDUCATION

Transfer Test

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education to list the Transfer Test results by grades A1 to D for (a) all single sex girls' schools; and (b) all single sex boys schools, in particular, St Mary's Boys' School, Newcastle and St Mary's Girls' School, Newcastle for each year inclusive from 1990 to 2001, for which figures are available.

(AQW 1903/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): As the information requested is extensive, I will arrange to have it placed in the Assembly Library. I enclose a copy for your personal use.

In line with the Department's policy on release of statistical information, numbers smaller than five have been suppressed in order to avoid potential disclosure of personal information.

Please note also that comparisons between individual schools based solely on these figures are likely to be unreliable, since they would not take account of pupils opting out of the tests, or of background factors such as entitlement to free school meals.

Consultancy Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how much money has been spent on external consultants and consultancy reports in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 1954/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Department of Education's expenditure on external consultants and consultancy reports in each of the last 3 years is:

Financial Year	Cost £
1999/00*	181,651
2000/01	877,174
2001/02 (to date)	179,734

* Period 2 December 1999-31 March 2000

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to list all Non-Departmental Public Bodies under her control, and to advise if they follow guidance on reporting fraud to the Comptroller and Auditor General, as required under Government Accounting procedures. (AQW 1987/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Non-Departmental Public Bodies under my control are:

- The five Education and Library Boards
- The Staff Commission for Education and Library Boards
- The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
- The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
- The Youth Council for Northern Ireland

All these Public Bodies follow the guidance on reporting fraud as required under Government Accounting procedures.

Threshold Payments

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education when he will complete the processing of threshold payments for (a) part-time; (b) temporary; and (c) supply teachers. [R] (AQW 1988/01)

Mr M McGuinness: While the final figures are not yet available my Department expects to receive approximately 13,480 successful applications for Threshold payments of which it will be responsible for processing approximately 10,885. By the end of February 2002, it expects to have processed 9,800 (90%) of these.

Applications from full-time, part-time and temporary (or supply) teachers, are being processed together and the Department is making every effort to process the remaining applications by 31 March 2002.

Grades Achieved

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of the age group achieving 5+ grades A* - C in GCSE or equivalent examination in

(a) 1999; (b) 1967 in (i) Grammar Schools; and (ii) Secondary Schools. (AQW 1999/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In 1998/99 95% of Year 12 pupils in Grammar Schools and 33% of Year 12 pupils in Secondary Schools achieved 5+ GCSEs Grades A* - C/GNVQ Intermediate Part 1 Passes.

The percentage of the relevant age group achieving equivalent examination results in 1966/67 is unavailable. In 1966/67, 3% of Secondary School leavers and 75% of Grammar School leavers had achieved 5 or more GCE Ordinary Level Passes, or higher qualifications.

Enrolment Statistics

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Education how many pupils are enrolled at (i) Catholic Maintained Primary Schools; (ii) Controlled Primary Schools; (iii) Controlled Integrated Primary Schools; and (iv) Voluntary Primary Schools. (AQW 2005/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The enrolments are as follows:

YEAR 1-YEAR 7 PUPILS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND PREP. DEPARTMENTS

Catholic Maintained	78,742
Controlled	82,521
Controlled Integrated	1,467
Voluntary	2,268
Other Maintained	1,643
Grant Maintained Integrated	3,912
Total	170,553

Primary School: Religious Make-up of Pupils

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Education how many children enrolled at Primary Schools are (a) Protestant; (b) Roman Catholic; and (c) Others. (AQW 2006/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The information requested is as follows:

YEAR 1-YEAR 7 PUPILS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND PREP. DEPARTMENTS

Protestant	72,612
Roman Catholic	85,048
Others	12,893
Total	170,553

Parkview Special School

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of young people leaving Parkview Special School over the next five years. (AQW 2032/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of young people leaving Parkview Special School over the next five years is as follows:

Easter and June 2002	4
Christmas 2002 to June 2003	9
Christmas 2003 to June 2004	16
Christmas 2004 to June 2005	7
Christmas 2005 to June 2006	9
Christmas 2006	1
Total	46

Autism and Dyslexia

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1554/01, to detail (a) the cost of the project for developing videos for parents of children with autism and dyslexia and CD-ROMs for teachers; (b) how much of the cost was funded by his Department; and (c) how much of the cost was funded by the Department of Education and Science in the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 2054/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The cost of producing the video for parents of children with autism is expected to be less than £20,000; the CD-ROM for teachers will cost over £20,000, (subject to competitive tender). Development and administration costs will be around £45,000.

My Department will meet the entire cost of the autism project.

In a reciprocal arrangement, the costs of the dyslexia video and CD-ROM will be met by the Department of Education and Science in the South of Ireland.

School Capital Building Programme

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education if he will give due consideration to the Loanends Primary School in the forthcoming School Capital Building Programme. (AQW 2078/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I shall be considering the school for a place in this year's capital programme in the light of the resources available.

Inter Board Numeracy Strategy Steering Group

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the Inter Board Numeracy Strategy Steering Group, to detail (a) the members; (b) the total cost including set-up and running costs; and (c) if the Group is still in existence. (AQW 2079/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Membership of the Inter Board Numeracy Strategy Steering Group is as follows:

Mr G Campbell	Belfast Education and Library Board
Mrs E Ross	Southern Education and Library Board
Mr J Cormican	North-Eastern Education and Library Board
Mrs M Torrens	Belfast Education and Library Board
Mrs L Johnston	South-Eastern Education and Library Board
Mrs M Clifford	Western Education and Library Board
Mrs C Delargy	Southern Education and Library Board
Ms L Irwin	South-Eastern Education and Library Board
Mr J Donnelly	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
Mrs J Hughes	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
Ms R Gibson	Northern Bank
Mr M Smyth	Graham Training, Lisburn
Ms S Kidd	University of Ulster
Mr B Spiers	Education & Training Inspectorate Assessor

There are no direct costs involved in the set-up and operation of the Group, which continues to meet.

Ready, Set, Go-Maths, a practical handbook for teachers, a CD Rom and game sets have been produced. The cost of the research and the materials was some £137,000. The 10 participating schools are as follows:

Belfast Education and Library Board	Black Mountain Primary School Star of the Sea Primary School
North-Eastern Education and Library Board	Ballyhenry Primary School St Mary's on the Hill Primary School
South-Eastern Education and Library Board	Clandeboy Primary School St Mary's Primary School, Portaferry
Southern Education and Library Board	Aughnacloy Primary School St Macartan's Convent Primary School
Western Education and Library Board	Sion Mills Primary School St Mary's Boys' Primary School, Strabane

Inter Board Numeracy Strategy Steering Group

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1555/01, to detail (a) the materials produced by the Inter Board Numeracy Strategy Steering Group; (b) the cost of the research and materials; and (c) the 10 participating primary schools. (AQW 2080/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Membership of the Inter Board Numeracy Strategy Steering Group is as follows:

Mr G Campbell	Belfast Education and Library Board
Mrs E Ross	Southern Education and Library Board

Mr J Cormican	North-Eastern Education and Library Board
Mrs M Torrens	Belfast Education and Library Board
Mrs L Johnston	South-Eastern Education and Library Board
Mrs M Clifford	Western Education and Library Board
Mrs C Delargy	Southern Education and Library Board
Ms L Irwin	South-Eastern Education and Library Board
Mr J Donnelly	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
Mrs J Hughes	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
Ms R Gibson	Northern Bank
Mr M Smyth	Graham Training, Lisburn
Ms S Kidd	University of Ulster
Mr B Spiers	Education & Training Inspectorate Assessor

There are no direct costs involved in the set-up and operation of the Group, which continues to meet.

Ready, Set, Go-Maths, a practical handbook for teachers, a CD Rom and game sets have been produced. The cost of the research and the materials was some £137,000. The 10 participating schools are as follows:

Belfast Education and Library Board	Black Mountain Primary School Star of the Sea Primary School
North-Eastern Education and Library Board	Ballyhenry Primary School St Mary's on the Hill Primary School
South-Eastern Education and Library Board	Clandeboy Primary School St Mary's Primary School, Portaferry
Southern Education and Library Board	Aughnacloy Primary School St Macartan's Convent Primary School
Western Education and Library Board	Sion Mills Primary School St Mary's Boys' Primary School, Strabane

Enrolment Statistics

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils attending (i) Catholic Maintained Primary Schools; (ii) Controlled Primary Schools; (iii) Controlled Integrated Primary Schools; and (iv) Irish Medium Primary Schools in the 2001-02 school year. (AQW 2097/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The 2001/02 Year 1-Year 7 enrolments are as follows:

(i)	Catholic Maintained	78,742 ¹
(ii)	Controlled	82,521
(iii)	Controlled Integrated	1,467
(iv)	Irish Medium	1,219 ²

¹ Includes one Irish Medium School with an enrolment of 202 pupils.

² Excludes one Irish Medium Catholic Maintained School.

Portavogie Primary School

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1618/02, to detail (a) his plans regarding the provision of an extension to the Portavogie Primary School building; and (b) to give a timescale for the completion of any such work; and to make a statement. (AQW 2099/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I understand that the South-Eastern Education and Library Board plans to build an extension to Portavogie Primary School. It hopes to start work on site towards the end of the next financial year and to complete it in the summer of 2003.

Teachers

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1667/01, to detail the number of (a) people employed within the Catholic Maintained Sector; (b) Protestants employed within the Catholic Maintained Sector; (c) people employed within the Controlled Sector; and (d) Roman Catholics employed within the Controlled Sector. (AQW 2100/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

- The number of teachers employed within the Catholic Maintained sector is 7,211;
- The Department of Education does not hold information on the religious denominations of teachers employed within the Catholic Maintained sector;
- The number of teachers employed within the Controlled sector is 10,979;
- The Department of Education does not hold information on the religious denominations of teachers employed within the Controlled sector.

Teachers: Employing Authorities

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1667/01, to detail (a) the names and addresses of 'employing authorities' involved in setting specific criteria for particular posts within the Catholic Maintained Sector; and (b) those posts, which are available within the Catholic Maintained Sector, that do not demand a Catholic Religious Education Certificate. (AQW 2103/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

- The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools employs all the teachers that are required on the staff of Catholic maintained schools. It has overall responsibility for the procedures to be followed by the Boards of Governors of Catholic maintained schools in relation to the appointment of such teachers, including the specific criteria they set for particular posts. The

address of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools is –

160 High Street, Holywood, Co Down, BT18 9AZ

- The Department of Education does not hold this detailed information. The recruitment and appointment of teaching staff to all permanent posts in Catholic maintained schools is the responsibility of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

Nursery Places: Percentage of Children

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of children under 5 years of age in nursery places in each Education Authority in each year since 1998. (AQW 2104/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Complete data for 2001/02 are not yet available. The percentages (based on the 3-year old population) are as follows:

1998/99	Belfast	West- ern	North- Eastern	South- Eastern	South- ern	Total
Voluntary and Private Pre-School Education Centres ¹	7	12	8	6	7	8
Nursery Schools	40	17	24	22	14	23
Nursery classes	28	12	9	9	16	14
Reception	2	14	7	9	18	10
Total	77	55	47	46	55	55
1999/00						
Voluntary and Private Pre-School Education Centres ¹	14	19	17	10	12	14
Nursery Schools	45	18	25	24	17	25
Nursery classes	31	14	12	11	21	17
Reception	2	14	6	9	16	10
Total	92	65	60	53	66	66
2000/01						
Voluntary and Private Pre-School Education Centres ¹	12	18	19	15	14	16
Nursery Schools	41	18	25	23	16	24
Nursery classes	35	29	17	20	25	24
Reception	2	8	5	7	17	8
Total	90	73	66	65	71	72

¹-School Education Expansion Programme.

Decentralisation of Jobs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of personnel currently employed within

his department and how many of these jobs may be decentralised between January and December 2002.

(AQW 2110/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department has 603 administrative staff of which 419 are located in Bangor and 122 are located in Derry. The Education and Training Inspectorate has 62 staff, the majority of which work from home at various locations.

I have no proposals at this time for any further relocation or decentralisation of my Department's functions within the timescale that you specify. You will wish to note however that a Strategic Review of Civil Service Office Accommodation, which includes an examination of the scope for decentralisation of Civil Service jobs, is currently underway. Pending the outcome of the review, opportunities to relocate Civil Service jobs will continue to be examined on a case by case basis, as particular needs and issues arise. Where there are considered to be pressing accommodation needs or where short-term decisions are required, business cases are prepared taking full account of the current relocation policy.

Townland Names

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education how he has encouraged the use of townland names in written communications.

(AQW 2122/01)

School Name	1992/93	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02
Ballyholme Primary School	706	715	714	717	721	708	691	686	670	638
Ballymagee Primary School	n/a	n/a	138	217	283	352	384	396	412	404
Ballyvester Primary School	87	89	97	92	84	91	90	87	79	80
Bangor Central Primary School	414	414	437	448	455	455	482	479	499	491
Bangor Grammar School Prep. Department	136	140	141	129	121	119	115	110	120	119
Bloomfield Road Primary School	399	376	347	351	350	339	323	306	301	310
Clandeboy Primary School	559	539	551	546	504	467	441	401	382	344
Conlig Primary School	67	70	63	62	58	66	54	51	56	52
Crawfordsburn Primary School	64	80	106	105	129	138	151	144	133	164
Donaghadee Primary School	393	435	459	479	475	486	484	451	450	427
Glencraig Primary School	204	196	186	179	176	195	202	189	178	175
Glenlola Collegiate Prep. Department	84	86	96	96	98	99	94	84	78	72
Grange Park Primary School	291	295	318	330	333	342	352	359	362	356
Groomsport Primary School	47	43	45	46	49	43	37	36	30	24
Hollywood Primary School	538	521	516	529	536	514	472	475	446	445
Kilcooley Primary School	272	267	225	212	189	165	153	140	141	131
Kilmaine Primary School	1005	1026	959	913	862	814	792	752	685	678
Millisle Primary School	168	171	171	159	157	143	134	140	138	142
Rathmore Primary School	532	510	492	498	511	482	445	434	435	429
Redburn Primary School	160	166	149	186	170	166	136	144	153	168
St Anne's Primary School	45	38	35	44	45	51	57	55	51	46
St Comgall's Primary School	258	235	235	233	235	233	259	256	267	276
St Malachy's Primary School	345	356	315	312	326	339	332	350	338	354
St Patrick's Primary School	213	212	214	221	211	215	216	220	221	229
Sullivan Upper School Prep. Department	196	193	190	191	189	191	190	183	178	181
Towerview Primary School	341	347	361	356	338	336	330	334	339	339

Mr M McGuinness: I recognise the importance of townland names as part of our local heritage and my Department, in replying to correspondence, will use townland names, where these have been included by correspondents in their addresses.

Policy on Weapons in School

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Education to outline his policy on dealing with children who bring weapons into school.

(AQW 2143/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Policy on dealing with children who bring weapons into school is a matter for the school. Schools are responsible for their own discipline policies and within these to determine the sanctions which will be applied in respect of any breaches.

Primary School Enrolments

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils enrolled in each primary school in the constituency of North Down in each of the last 10 years.

(AQW 2152/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Year 1-Year 7 enrolments of each currently open primary school in the constituency

School Leavers Without Formal Qualifications

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils who reached the end of compulsory education without qualifications.

(AQW 2173/01)

Mr M McGuinness: At the end of the 1999/2000 school year, some 753 pupils aged 16 left school having reached the end of compulsory education without formal qualifications.

These figures do not include pupils at special or independent schools.

School Leavers Without Formal Qualifications

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils who have left school at age 16 with no formal qualifications in each of the last 10 years.

(AQW 2179/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of pupils who left school at age 16 with no formal qualifications in each of the last 10 years is as follows:

1990/91	1,567
1991/92	1,234
1992/93	879
1993/94	751
1994/95	697
1995/96	308*
1996/97	644
1997/98	587
1998/99	605
1999/2000	753

* Qualifications data were missing for 479 16-year-old school leavers in 1995/96. There is evidence that the missing data relate predominantly to those with no GCSE's.

These figures do not include pupils at special or independent schools.

Classroom Assistants

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to detail the present average number of pupils per classroom assistant employed in primary schools in each Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 2251/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The information requested is not available. However, my Department's Making a Good Start P1 Initiative provided resources to enable all P1 classes in primary schools to have at least one classroom assistant. Additionally, there are a number of classroom assistants employed in primary schools on a one to one basis for certain children with special educational needs.

The average Year 1 class size is 22.2.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Welfare to Work Initiatives

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assistance is given to help people re-train and find employment.

(AQW 1931/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): New Deal, one of Government's main Welfare to Work initiatives, is available to help unemployed people to re-train and find employment. In addition Focus for Work allows for early intervention into the unemployment cycle by offering a range of assistance, from help and advice in applying for jobs through to placement in vocational training and work experience opportunities.

Transition From Education to Employment

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures are in place to support young people in making the transition from education to employment.

(AQW 1932/01)

Ms Hanna: Young people making the transition from education to employment are assisted by professionally qualified staff within my Department's Careers Service in making informed decisions about opportunities in education, training and employment. All 16 and 17 year old school leavers are guaranteed a vocational training opportunity within the Department's Jobskills programme.

Hospitality & Tourism and Consumer Studies

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students have registered to date for School of Hospitality, Tourism and Consumer Studies courses at the University of Ulster (i) Jordanstown Campus; (ii) Magee Campus and do these numbers reflect previous enrolment patterns over the previous 5 years. [R]

(AQW 1944/01)

Ms Hanna: The tables attached provide information on the number of students enrolled on Hospitality & Tourism, and Consumer Studies courses at the University of Ulster (i) Jordanstown Campus; and (ii) Magee Campus in the 2000/01 academic year.

ENROLMENTS ON HOSPITALITY & TOURISM COURSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS BY MODE OF STUDY LEVEL OF STUDY AND CAMPUS.

		Hospitality & Tourism				
		1996/9	1997/9	1998/9	1999/0	2000/0
Jordans-	FT	266	269	252	212	216
town	Undergraduate					

Jordans-town	PT Undergraduate	29	28	35	35	35
	Total Undergraduate	295	297	287	247	251
	FT Postgraduate	14	23	10	6	10
	PT Postgraduate	6	6	5	4	24
	Total Undergraduate	20	29	15	10	34
	Total	315	326	302	257	285
Magee	FT Undergraduate	169	153	140	131	117
	PT Undergraduate	4	4	5	4	2
	Total Undergraduate	173	157	145	135	119
	FT Postgraduate	16	22	18	12	5
	PT Postgraduate	0	2	5	3	1
	Total Undergraduate	16	24	23	15	6
	Total	189	181	168	150	125

Source: HESA Dataset

ENROLMENTS ON CONSUMER STUDIES COURSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS BY MODE OF STUDY LEVEL OF STUDY AND CAMPUS.

		Consumer Studies				
		1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Jordans - town	FT Undergraduate	122	132	138	156	172
	PT Undergraduate	0	0	0	0	0
	Total Undergraduate	122	132	138	156	172
	FT Postgraduate	0	0	0	0	0
	PT Postgraduate	0	0	0	0	0
	Total Undergraduate	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	122	132	138	156	172

Source: HESA Dataset

Notes: Consumer Studies courses are not available at Magee

University of Ulster: Course Development

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment can she make in relation to current plans to develop the University of Ulster and its courses at (i) Jordanstown Campus; (ii) Coleraine Campus; (iii) Magee Campus; and to make a statement./R/ (AQW 1950/01)

Ms Hanna: UU, like all other UK universities, is a legally independent institution with autonomy to conduct

its academic operations, including the development of its curriculum and the location of its courses, as it sees fit.

SNIPEF

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the number of students who enrolled for the SNIPEF pilot scheme; (b) the total budget for the pilot scheme; and (c) the percentage of the budget allocated to the management of the pilot scheme. (AQW 1978/01)

Ms Hanna: The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), in conjunction with SNIPEF and the NI Master Plumbers Association, is contracted with the Department to deliver two pilot Building Engineering Services (Plumbing) Jobskills Modern Apprenticeship programmes. 21 young people have commenced the pilots.

CITB will receive £8,300 in respect of each young person who successfully completes their Modern Apprenticeship. The allocation of this sum will be a matter for CITB taking account of the cost of the delivery of training for the apprentices.

New Deal

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the budget for each phase of (a) New Deal for 18-24; and (b) New Deal 25+.

(AQW 2027/01)

Ms Hanna: The information requested is detailed below:

	New Deal for 18-24	New Deal for 25+
1998-2001	£82.9m	£56.4m
2001-2002	£14.8m	£21.6m

From 1998 to 2001 the funding for the New Deal for 18-24 Year Olds and the New Deal for 25+ came from the proceeds of the Windfall Levy on the privatised utilities. For the year 2001-2002 the funding is provided from the Northern Ireland Budget.

New Deal

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much of the budget was unused and returned after the end of each phase of (a) New Deal for 18-24; and (b) New Deal 25+. (AQW 2028/01)

Ms Hanna: The information requested is detailed below:

	New Deal for 18-24	New Deal for 25+
1998-2001	£52.8m	£30.8m
2001-2002	£ 3.9m	£11.2m

From 1998 to 2001 the allocations for the New Deal for 18-24 Year Olds and the New Deal for 25+ were provided from a special UK-wide fund created from the proceeds of the Windfall Levy on privatised utilities. An overall allocation was made at the outset of the New Deal programme to cover the duration of the Parliament. Unused monies were returned to the special fund. For the year 2001- 02 the allocations for New Deal are provided from within the Northern Ireland Budget and unused amounts are returned to the centre for reallocation within Northern Ireland.

New Deal

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many persons to date were helped during each phase of (a) New Deal for 18-24; and (b) New Deal 25+. (AQW 2029/01)

Ms Hanna: The information requested is in the table below.

There are three phases in New Deal. 'Gateway' is the entry phase and includes help with jobsearch, careers advice and guidance. In the second phase participants proceed to an 'option' involving employment, work experience, training and jobsearch. Finally 'Follow-Through' gives further help to those who, at the end of an option, have not secured employment.

	Gateway	Options	Follow-Through
New Deal 18-24	18022	8314	2642
New Deal 25+	27050	14523	8773

New Deal

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what she intends to do to ensure better understanding and take up by those eligible for (a) New Deal for 18-24; and (b) New Deal 25+. (AQW 2030/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department attaches priority to ensuring that New Deal Personal Advisors are trained to provide those eligible for New Deal 18-24 and New Deal 25+ with the appropriate advice on New Deal and the options that will best meet their needs.

Monitoring Rounds

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what underspend was reported at each of the monitoring rounds by her Department since the re-establishment of the Executive following suspension. (AQW 2047/01)

Ms Hanna: The following were the results of monitoring rounds during the period specified:

Monitoring Round	Amount (£000)
June 2000	1,855
September 2000	3,067
December 2000	-3,700
February 2001	-4,388
July 2001	6,970
September 2001	-14,644
December 2001	-8,629
February 2002	Not finalised

Negative numbers are reductions and positive numbers are additions to the Department's budget.

East Antrim Institute of Further and Higher Education: Larne Campus

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the steps taken to date to enable the Larne Campus of the East Antrim Institute of Higher and Further Education to become a fully functional educational facility for the people of that Borough. (AQW 2056/01)

Ms Hanna: An economic appraisal has been approved which provides for a new building on the existing Larne site. The new building is to be self-financed from sale proceeds of part of that site, although the Institute has now indicated that there is likely to be a delay in selling the land. My Department is currently considering its capital works programme for 2002/03 and will, as part of that process, consider any alternative proposals from East Antrim for taking forward a new campus at Larne.

New Deal

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail, by electoral ward, the number of people currently on the New Deal programme. (AQW 2058/01)

Ms Hanna: The information requested for the New Deal for 18-24 Year Olds; New Deal for 25+; and New Deal 50plus relating to occupancy at the end of January 2002 has been laid in the Assembly Library.

Annual Output of Further and Higher Education Graduates and Technicians

Mr Davis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the current annual output of Further and Higher Education graduates and technicians in (a) information technology; and (b) electronic engineering. (AQW 2081/01)

Ms Hanna: Details of the current annual output of Further and Higher Education graduates and technicians in (a) information technology; and (b) electronic engineering – for further and higher education are shown in the attached tables:

Further Education 1999-00:

OUTPUTS OF THOSE GAINING FULL-PASSES BY MODE OF ATTENDANCE AND LEVEL OF STUDY AT NI FURTHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS 1999/00

Subject	Mode of Attendance	Higher Education	Further Education	Total
Computing / ICT	Full-Time	131	708	839
	Part-Time	355	8,344	8,699
	Total	486	9,052	9,538
Software Engineering I	Full-Time	0	0	0
	Part-Time	51	45	96
	Total	51	45	96
Electronic / Electrical Engineering	Full-Time	22	153	175
	Part-Time	74	264	338
	Total	96	417	513
Table Total		633	9,514	10,147

Source: FELS

A number of full-time Software Engineering courses, of two year duration were introduced to the Further Education sector in 1999-00. Full pass figures for this subject area will be available when 2000-01 leavers data becomes available in April 2002.

Higher Education 2000-01:

STUDENTS GAINING QUALIFICATIONS AT NI HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS BY MODE OF ATTENDANCE AND LEVEL OF STUDY 2000-01.

Subject	Mode of Attendance	Post-graduate	Under-graduate	Total
ICT/ Software Engineering	Full-time & Sandwich	223	524	747
	Part-time & Other	275	79	354
	Total	498	603	1,101
Electronics & Electrical Engineering	Full-time & Sandwich	4	111	115
	Part-time & Other	43	0	43
	Total	47	111	158
Table Total		545	714	1,259

Source: HESA

Governors of Further Education Colleges

Mr Leslie asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to make a statement on the response to the recent recruitment process for Governors of Further Education Colleges. (AQW 2082/01)

Ms Hanna: Three hundred and seventeen (317) applications have been received as a result of the recent Northern Ireland wide advertising campaign for Governors of Further Education Colleges in the business, industry and professions category of membership. Applications are being assessed by a Departmental panel which includes an independent assessor. Appointments will be made on 1 April 2002.

Individual Learning Accounts

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to make a statement as to progress on the review of the Individual Learning Accounts. (AQW 2084/01)

Ms Hanna: The review is examining the operation and impact of the Individual Learning Account national framework as it applied in Northern Ireland. It is examining not only how far the scheme met its objectives of attracting more Northern Ireland people into lifelong learning but also, in conjunction with the other UK administrations, the circumstances leading up to the shut down of the ILA Centre system. It is vital to have a thorough understanding of these issues as I plan the way ahead. I will announce my intentions as soon as possible, bearing in mind the Programme for Government aim for new arrangements by September 2002.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail expenditure figures for those non-Departmental Public Bodies under her responsibility in each year since 1995. (AQW 2212/01)

Ms Hanna: The annual Cabinet Office Publication, "Public Bodies" provides a range of information including expenditure for Northern Ireland Non Departmental Public Bodies. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Assembly Library and are also available on the Cabinet Office website, www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quangos

New Deal

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail, by constituency, the number of people who (a) have completed the New Deal employer option since 1998; and (b) having completed the option, have accessed full-time employment. (AQO 866/01)

Ms Hanna: I have placed a table detailing the information requested by JobCentre area in the Assembly library as this is most reliable geographical breakdown. In Northern Ireland as a whole, 6,343 people finished employer options between April 1998 and October 2001 and 4,270 of these have remained in their New

Deal job or taken up other employment. Data refers to full-time and part-time employment.

Financial Support for Students

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what specific financial support exists for (a) mature students; and (b) mature students with dependants. (AQO 891/01)

Ms Hanna: The support system for NI students of all ages is based on family or personal income and specific circumstances and needs. While the main source of living cost support is a student loan, from 2002 means-tested non-repayable HE Bursaries will be introduced. There are also a number of non-repayable Supplementary Allowances available, such as the Childcare Grant, Dependants Allowance and the Schools Meals Grant, which are designed to provide additional financial assistance to students with children and dependants.

Castlereagh College's Outreach Centre, Dundonald

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail, for the past 5 years, (a) the number of students registered at Castlereagh College's outreach centre in Dundonald; (b) the amount of overspend at the centre; and (c) all outreach centres which are currently running at a financial loss. (AQO 867/01)

Ms Hanna: The number of students registered at Castlereagh College's outreach centre at Dundonald for the academic years 1997-1998 to 2001-2002 is as follows: 1,322; 1,298; 1,292; 1,155; and, 1,066.

Castlereagh has informed us that the estimated amount of overspend at the centre during the academic years 1999-2000 and 2001-02 is some £46,000 and £63,000 respectively. Information for earlier years could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

The Department does not collect information on the financial position of individual outreach centres. This information could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

Student Satisfaction in FE Colleges

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what research has been done on the level of student satisfaction with further education colleges. (AQO 887/01)

Ms Hanna: The Department has not undertaken any specific research on levels of student satisfaction in FE Colleges. The Education and Training Inspectorate consider the student experience as part of their evaluation of

learning and teaching in all colleges and individual colleges have carried out their own surveys.

Adult Literacy Strategy

Mr O'Connor asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions have taken place between her Department and the Department of Education on the subject of literacy. (AQO 897/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department will be publishing proposals in the near future aimed at improving the levels of literacy in Northern Ireland. Officials drafting these proposals have been advised on a regular and ongoing basis by the Education and Training Inspectorate from the Department of Education. My Department has consulted with senior officers in the Department of Education on the issue of literacy to ensure that the Adult Literacy Strategy builds on the work of that Department.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Strategic Review of Civil Service Office Accommodation

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to indicate the number of personnel currently employed within his department and how many of these jobs may be decentralised between January and December 2002. (AQW 2038/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The Department of Enterprise Trade & Investment currently employs some 1136 staff.

A Strategic Review of Civil Service Office Accommodation, which includes an examination of the scope for decentralisation of Civil Service jobs, is currently ongoing. Pending the outcome of the review, opportunities to relocate Civil Service jobs will continue to be examined on a case-by-case basis, as particular needs and issues arise. Where there are considered to be pressing accommodation needs or where short-term decisions are required, business cases are prepared taking full account of the current relocation policy.

Coats Viyella: Job Losses

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his plans to address the serious impact on the employment situation in Randalstown regarding job losses at the Coats Viyella factory. (AQW 2077/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Industrial Development Board (IDB) is continuing to work with the employment services of the Department of Employment and Learning and Coats Viyella management to obtain an orderly run down of production at Dorma Old Bleachworks. IDB will also be responding to any expressions of interest in the business from other parties to secure the best possible outcome for those affected. In addition, IDB is helping promote the factory and surrounding site to bring it to the attention of other businesses by placing it on IDB's Property Services web site.

IDB will continue to market the Antrim area to potential investors. In the period April 1998 to date, there have been 59 first time and 17 repeat visits by potential investors to the Antrim Borough Council area. Additionally, a package of measures is being implemented to raise the profile and marketability of the Antrim Technology Park.

In terms of support to existing companies within the Antrim Borough Council area, all IDB and Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU) client companies are encouraged to use the range of programmes available within my Department to improve their international competitiveness through business excellence and to increase international trade. A number of companies within the Antrim Borough Council area have made use of these initiatives including undertaking competitiveness assessments and participating on Market Access Visits to target overseas markets.

Small businesses account for 98.2% of the total business base and 57.0% of employment in the Antrim Borough. There are 58 (LEDU) businesses in Antrim actively exporting and these employ 1088 people. LEDU is working with the small indigenous businesses in Antrim borough to secure employment and deliver growth in export markets. LEDU is also working closely with Antrim Council and Antrim Enterprise Agency in respect of a number of business development and start-up programmes. LEDU has funded the development and delivery of a Fresh Start Enterprise Programme that will target those affected by redundancy.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) continues to promote investment by undertaking marketing activity and through the provision of financial assistance for marketing and development projects. The NITB will continue to work with the Councils and local tourism providers to promote tourism in the area.

Coats Viyella: Viability

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment he has made of the long-term commercial viability of the Coats Viyella plant in Randalstown. (AQW 2086/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The critical factors in the assessment of viability were the levels of future work that might be available for the Dorma group, the potential interest from a new customer base and the possibility of selling the business.

The amount of business from Dorma would not have been adequate to sustain a Management Buy Out, there was insufficient interest from potential new customers and a buyer for the business could not be found.

Coats Viyella: Management Buy Out

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why, even with IDB support, senior officials at Coats Viyella failed in their management buy-out initiative. (AQW 2087/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The key issue here is that identified by the management team that even with IDB support the projected levels of future sales from Coats Viyella are insufficient to sustain a new business and the Management Buy Out team have been unable to gain any interest from potential customers.

Having considered those factors they concluded that a Management Buy Out would not be viable.

Townland Names

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how he is encouraging the use of townland names in written communications. (AQW 2088/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department's policy is to respond to correspondence using the address supplied by the correspondents, adding the postcode where necessary to ensure efficient mailing. Therefore, if someone writes to my Department supplying their Townland name my officials would respond also using the Townland name as part of the address.

InterTradeIreland

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to his North-South Ministerial Council statement on Trade and Business Development on Monday 4 February 2002, when will InterTrade Ireland be in a position to launch their initiative to support microbusinesses operating in the border region. (AQW 2138/01)

Sir Reg Empey: InterTradeIreland (ITI) has advised me that they have developed a programme aimed specifically at helping micro-businesses develop potential to trade cross-border. Launch of this programme requires EU state aid approval, which is presently being sought.

Development of Small Businesses

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what structures will exist within "Invest Northern Ireland" for the development of small businesses. (AQO 880/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In its draft Corporate Plan which was published on 11 February 2002, Invest Northern Ireland has made it clear that it will seek to respond to the particular challenges of helping small businesses to win an increasing share of international business in markets that are increasingly more competitive and more globally focused. Invest NI has also set as a priority the need to encourage a much higher rate of business births through the development of a more enterprising culture.

ENVIRONMENT

Licensed Landfill Sites

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of the Environment to list, by District Council area, licensed landfill sites and to specify the categories of waste eligible to be deposited. (AQW 1935/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): [*holding answer 26 February 2002*]: At present, District Councils are responsible for licensing landfill sites. However, under proposed Waste Management Licensing Regulations to be made under the Waste and Contaminated Land (NI) Order 1997, this function will transfer to my Department.

In preparation for this transfer, my Department asked District Councils for information on licensed landfill sites in September 2000. A request to update this information was sent to all District Councils in January 2002. When my Department has received and collated this information, I will arrange for a copy to be sent to the Member.

2002 Ulster Motor Show

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of the Environment why the Department did not avail of the opportunity to have a presence at the 2002 Ulster Motor Show in order to promote road safety; and to make a statement. (AQW 1936/01)

Mr Nesbitt: [*holding answer 26 February 2002*]: My Department's two road safety agencies, the Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency (DVTA) and Driver and Vehicle Licensing NI (DVLNI) were involved at the 2002 Ulster Motor Show.

The Police Service exhibition stand at the Motor Show featured the driving theory test which is provided by DVTA as part of the Department's driver training and testing arrangements. This provided the opportunity for DVTA to make available a demonstration of the touchscreen driving theory test and reflects the close partnership between my Department and the Police Service of Northern Ireland in promoting road safety.

DVLNI, which seeks to ensure that only qualified drivers are licensed to drive on the public road network and, for certain categories of licence, that drivers are medically fit to drive, also had a small stand at the Show. DVLNI staff received positive feedback from members of the public who had the opportunity to obtain application forms and to resolve questions on a one to one basis. The bulk of the questions related to driver licensing topics such as, the effect of medical conditions on holding a driving licence.

My Department's Road Safety Branch explored the possibility of an interactive stand supporting the Department's current commercial promoting seatbelt wearing. However, due to the unavailability of the necessary simulation equipment it was decided not to proceed with this venture.

I hope this reassures the Member that my Department recognises the valuable opportunity afforded by the Motor Show to promote aspects of road safety. Each year my road safety officials consider with the Department's publicity advisers, the most cost-effective use that can be made of the resources available for road safety education, publicity and associated public relations activity. I can assure the Member that the merits of the Ulster Motor Show as a venue for road safety promotional activity will continue to be considered in this context.

Planning Applications: Maladministration

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what action is available to those objecting to a planning application where evidence of malpractice has been produced over 30 days from the granting of outline planning permission. (AQW 1937/01)

Mr Nesbitt: [*holding answer 26 February 2002*]: I understand that you have subsequently confirmed that you meant the question to relate to evidence of maladministration rather than malpractice.

An objector may make a complaint to the Planning Service by following the Agency's complaints procedure. If an objector is dissatisfied with the Department's response, and considers they have suffered injustice because of maladministration by my Department, a complaint may be made to the Northern Ireland Ombudsman, supported by a MLA. The Ombudsman will normally only consider a complaint if it is made

to a member of the Assembly not later than 12 months from the day on which the person aggrieved first had knowledge of the matters alleged in the complaint. However, he has discretion to accept a complaint for investigation beyond this time limit if he considers that there are special circumstances, which make it proper for him to do so.

An objector may also seek leave to judicially review the Department's decision. The Court rules provide that an application for leave to apply for judicial review shall be made promptly and in any event within three months from the date when the grounds for the application first arose, unless the court considers that there is good reason for extending the period within which the application shall be made. In relation to planning decisions the Courts have ruled in the past that "promptly" will generally be regarded as within a period of six weeks.

Consultancy Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how much money has been spent on external consultants and consultancy reports in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 1956/01)

Mr Nesbitt: [*holding answer 26 February 2002*]: Spend on external consultancy services in the last 3 years was as follows:

December 1999 – March 2000	£367,132
April 2000 – March 2001	£1,377,532
April 2001 – date	£626,630
Total	£2,371,295

Rear-View Mirrors

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to implement the recently adopted EU Directive IP/02/36 designed to upgrade the performance of rear view mirrors and indirect vision systems in an effort to reduce accidents at crossings, junctions and roundabouts. (AQW 1958/01)

Mr Nesbitt: [*holding answer 26 February 2002*]: I have no plans at present to implement the proposed European Directive regarding rear-view mirrors and indirect vision systems. This proposed Directive, which has not yet been adopted by the Parliament and Council, would introduce the first mandatory harmonised requirements for type approval of mirrors and systems for indirect vision for motor vehicles for the carriage of passengers and the carriage of goods within the European Union. The UK Government has submitted technical proposals to the European Commission setting out how an upgrade of vision systems could be dealt with, within the proposed Directive.

When the proposed Directive is agreed and adopted, consideration will be given as to how it will be implemented both in Great Britain and in Northern Ireland.

Waste Incinerators

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what guidelines are issued to local councils concerning the siting of waste incinerators.

(AQW 1960/01)

Mr Nesbitt: [*holding answer 26 February 2002*]: District Councils are the competent authorities and have responsibility for identifying the need for waste management in their area, including the most suitable methods for waste management. Councils have prepared waste management plans within a framework set down by my Department's Waste Management Strategy published in March 2000. These have recently gone to public consultation. They will establish the need for waste management facilities, the best practical environmental option for handling waste through every stage from its generation through to reuse or disposal, and provide advice in relation to the siting of facilities.

In addition the Regional Development Strategy prepared by the Department for Regional Development provides planning guidance for the location of waste management facilities. The Planning Service is currently preparing a Planning Policy Statement (PPS 11) on waste management that will set out my Department's policy on the location of various types of facility, including incinerators. It is intended to publish this in final form in the Spring.

Recycling

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what targets have been set for the recycling of waste over the next 10 years.

(AQW 1961/01)

Mr Nesbitt: [*holding answer 26 February 2002*]: Targets for recovery and recycling are included in the Waste Management Strategy for Northern Ireland, which was published by my Department in March 2000. These targets include:

- recovering 25% of household waste by 2005;
- recovering 40% of household waste by 2010, of which 25% must be by recycling or composting;
- District Council Waste Management Plans to make provision for recycling or composting 15% of household waste by 2005; and
- producers to recover a minimum of 58% of packaging waste, of which at least 25% must be recycled, including at least 15% of each packaging material.

It is intended that these targets will become mandatory at the first Strategy review in 2003, once

further studies of waste arisings and consultation have established that they are achievable.

The Strategy sets targets for reduction in the volumes of industrial and commercial wastes and of biodegradable municipal wastes going to landfill. It is implicit that increased recycling and composting levels (along with reductions in waste arisings) will be essential to the achievement of these targets.

Air Quality

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made on improving air quality since 1997. (AQW 1983/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Northern Ireland generally enjoys good air quality. Air quality monitoring indicates that no site has exceeded air quality limit values (standards), established under current Northern Ireland regulations, since 1992 and air quality has continued to improve since 1997 for the main pollutants of concern.

The framework for achieving air quality improvements in Northern Ireland is the Air Quality Strategy for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, published in January 2000. The Strategy sets objectives for eight main air pollutants to protect health. These pollutants are benzene, 1,3-butadiene, carbon monoxide, lead, nitrogen dioxide, ozone, particle (PM₁₀) and sulphur dioxide.

Measurements of nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide and particulate matter (PM₁₀) at the Belfast monitoring site show significant downward trends in hourly mean concentrations. Annual mean figures for nitrogen dioxide and PM₁₀ are also showing a significant downward trend. Historically, Northern Ireland has experienced problems with measured concentrations of sulphur dioxide (SO₂), primarily because of the dependency on solid fuel for home heating. However, in recent years, monitoring in Belfast has shown a sharp decline in both annual mean and hourly averaged concentrations. There have been no breaches of the EC Directive limits for smoke and sulphur dioxide in Northern Ireland since 1992.

Lead concentrations have fallen dramatically since the reduction of the lead content of leaded petrol in 1986 and the introduction of unleaded petrol in 1987. Whilst lead is not monitored on an on-going basis in Northern Ireland, a report on the monitoring of metals around industrial sites published in 2001, concluded that the Air Quality Strategy objective standard was not exceeded at any monitoring location.

There are no significant trends in benzene concentrations at the Belfast South monitoring site. The annual mean for 1,3-butadiene indicates a slight down-

ward trend. Levels of both pollutants are well below Air Quality Strategy objective limits.

Strategic Partnership Boards: Council Representation

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment if he intends to review the Council representation on the Fermanagh and Down Strategic Partnership Boards. [R] (AQW 1984/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister of the Environment has no involvement in relation to appointments to local Strategic Partnership Boards. Council representation is entirely a matter for each district council.

Recycling

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to adopt European-wide measures to encourage recycling. (AQW 1985/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999, implement the requirements of the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive (94/62/EC). The Directive aims to minimise the amount of packaging generated and to decrease the tonnage going to landfill sites.

The Regulations impose on producers, obligations to recover and recycle packaging waste and related obligations in order to attain targets set in the Directive. My Department will shortly be issuing a consultation document on proposals to increase these targets for 2002.

The European Commission has carried out a review of the Directive and is proposing a substantial increase to recovery and recycling targets for Member States for the years 2003 to 2006. A consultation paper will issue in Northern Ireland in due course seeking views on these proposals.

The major obstacle to increasing levels of recycling in Northern Ireland is the lack of local recycling infrastructure and of markets for products containing recycled material.

The Waste Management Advisory Board established as part of the implementation of the Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy, is working with my Department to establish a Market Development Programme for recyclates.

The focus of the Programme will be to stimulate local demand for recycled materials by promoting the uptake of products, developing specifications and encouraging Government Departments, District Councils and major business in Northern Ireland to support recycling through their purchasing policies.

My Department is also grant aiding, from European Funding, a number of projects, involving recycling household waste, which will assist District Councils in meeting waste recycling targets.

Demolished Buildings

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to list all the buildings which have been demolished as a result of enforcement action by the Planning Service since 1991. (AQW 1986/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The information requested is not readily available, and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost to my Department.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment to list all Non-Departmental Public Bodies under his control, and to advise if they follow guidance on reporting fraud to the Comptroller and Auditor General, as required under Government Accounting procedures. (AQW 2009/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Non-Departmental Public Bodies sponsored by the Department of the Environment are:

- Local Government Staff Commission;
- NI Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee;
- Historic Buildings Council;
- Historic Monuments Council;
- Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside;
- Northern Ireland Review Body (Driver, Operator and Vehicle Licensing).

Neither the Local Government Staff Commission nor the NI Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee, receive grant from the Department, but as both handle substantial public funds, Accounting Officers have formally been designated. They are, therefore, required to conform with the guidance on reported fraud issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

The other bodies are advisory, with no executive functions, so the guidance on reporting fraud to the Comptroller and Auditor General is not relevant to them.

Planning Applications Delayed: Environment and Heritage Service Regulations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications have been delayed due to the Environment and Heritage Service regulations. (AQW 2061/01)

Mr Nesbitt: It is not possible to answer this question. Compliance with regulations is an integral part of the

planning process. My Department has a statutory duty to ensure that all planning proposals comply with regulations, and the time required to ensure compliance cannot be described as delaying the process.

Planning Service: Environment and Heritage Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what action is he taking to provide more staff within the Environmental and Heritage Service to improve the processing of planning applications. (AQW 2062/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Planning Service of my Department regularly consults the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) on planning applications which may have implications for the conservation of the natural or built environment. The EHS staff who deal with this work have other duties also.

It is my objective to ensure that, in processing planning applications, my Department not only does so effectively, but also in a way that maintains a balance between the development needs of the region and the protection of the natural and built environment.

Some of the relevant functions in EHS have benefited from the additional resources allocated to my Department since devolution. However, resource issues are kept under continual review and, in this respect my officials have been examining the present arrangements for handling planning applications. I expect to receive advice soon. I will then decide, in the context of the 2002 Spending Review, whether or not I need to seek additional resources for this work.

British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how is he addressing the British Trust for Ornithology survey findings between 1970 and 1998 indicating a decrease in the number of (i) Song Thrushes (down 59%); (ii) House Sparrows (down 43%); and (iii) Blackbirds (down 26%). (AQW 2064/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Information about these widespread bird species is derived from surveys co-ordinated by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), which are supported by the Environment and Heritage Service of my Department.

The figures quoted appear to relate to the UK as a whole. Information from Northern Ireland for the early part of this period is very sparse. Recent information, since 1994, is more reliable and does not suggest that there is any continuing decline in Northern Ireland. Indeed, since 1994 blackbird numbers have increased significantly.

My Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) is participating in a UK-wide action plan for the Song Thrush. The main purpose of this plan is to improve our understanding of the causes of the decline and, through the Agriculture Departments, to influence land-use management.

For Blackbird and House Sparrow, EHS is continuing to support the BTO surveys with a view to monitoring the population of these species in Northern Ireland. At the moment I do not consider there are grounds for undertaking any further targeted action for these species, although they too may well benefit from changes in land-use management.

Gocean Lodge Development Scheme

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) the date the planning application for Residential and Marina Development at Gocean House, Killyleagh was received by the Planning Service; (b) the date Down District Council was consulted; (c) Down District Council's decision on the application; (d) when will a planning determination be made; and to make a statement. (AQW 2066/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The application for planning permission for the Gocean Lodge Development scheme was received on 24 November 2000. Down District Council has not been consulted yet with an opinion on this application, as my Department has not completed its consideration of the proposal. Additional information in the form of an addendum to the Environmental Statement submitted with the proposal has been requested from the applicant, in light of deficiencies identified with the original Statement.

The application will be determined following receipt of the Addendum and full consideration of the proposal by my Department, including any additional comments received after advertisement of the Addendum and re-consultation with statutory consultees on its content.

Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what studies have been carried out on the effect of household waste water on overall water quality, and what monitoring is undertaken in this respect.

(AQW 2070/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Sewage treatment works in Northern Ireland are subject to the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive which seeks to ensure that the discharges from such works do not cause pollution. The Directive will apply progressively to all works, with full implementation required by the end of 2005.

In accordance with the Directive, my Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) sets standards, for discharges of treated sewage effluent, at a level designed to protect the aquatic environment.

EHS monitors compliance with these standards annually. Details of discharge standards for sewage treatment works, and the extent of compliance with these, are available on a public register held by EHS. A report on DRD's Water Service's compliance during 2001 is being prepared by EHS for presentation to the Environment Committee. It is expected to be available by April 2002 and I will arrange for a copy to be sent to the Member.

Investigations to assess the impact of sewage on water quality have focused on individual stretches of river that have caused concern to EHS as a result of information derived from routine monitoring and sampling. This has included visual examination and biological and chemical monitoring of rivers and streams. EHS also assesses the impact of intermittent discharges, such as overflows from sewage systems, which may occur, for example, during very heavy rainfall. Bacteriological monitoring has also been carried out on coastal waters to assess the impact of coastal discharges.

EHS has taken account of household discharges in a wide range of water quality and catchment initiatives. This resulted, for example, in the identification in 1994 of the Lough Erne and Lough Neagh catchments as being sensitive to eutrophication under the terms of the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive. Inner Belfast Lough, the tidal River Lagan, and the Quoile Pondage were identified as sensitive areas in 2001. As a result, nutrient reduction is, or will be, in place, where it is required by the Directive, at sewage treatment works within the designated areas.

Ballyhalbert Residents Group

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of the Environment if he has received a letter, dated 20 January 2002, from Ballyhalbert Residents Group about applications for residential development at the village of Ballyhalbert, and what action he has taken to provide the Group with a complete list of major planning applications for Ballyhalbert and local District area; and to make a statement. (AQW 2124/01)

Mr Nesbitt: A copy of the 20 January 2002 letter from the Ballyhalbert Residents Group addressed to Mr Ward, Divisional Planning Office, Downpatrick was received by my predecessor, Mr Foster, on 29 January 2002.

My Department replied to this letter on 21 February 2002. The reply provided details of the current status of all the major planning applications in the Ballyhalbert and local district area.

I can assure the Member that my Department will give careful consideration to these applications and any future proposals for the area, and ensure that they are processed in accordance with prevailing planning policies and all other material considerations.

Limiting Packaging

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to encourage firms/businesses/industry to reduce waste by limiting packaging on articles before they reach the consumer.

(AQW 2139/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999 implement the requirements of the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive (94/62/EC). The Directive aims to minimise the amount of packaging generated and to decrease the tonnage going to landfill sites.

The Regulations impose on producers targets for the recovery and recycling of packaging waste. The targets act as an incentive on business to reduce the amount of packaging produced. The Department will shortly be issuing a consultation document seeking views on proposals to increase these targets for 2002 in line with GB. A further consultation paper will issue in due course seeking views on EC proposals, following a review of the Directive, to increase targets substantially for the years 2003 to 2006.

Packaging is closely linked to the product it contains and the actual needs of the consumer. Companies must strike a balance between less packaging and the need to use sufficient packaging to ensure safety and hygiene.

My Department has published 'Guidelines for Company Reporting on Waste' to assist business. In addition the Waste Management Advisory Board has recently set up a Business Forum for Waste Minimisation.

The Industrial Research and Technology Unit of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment also provides advice and organises Waste Minimisation Clubs for businesses.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: Fermanagh

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the steps being taken to declare the area of Fermanagh, designated in the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025, as a proposed Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty as indicated in diagram 14 of the document; and (b) the timescale for this to occur.

(AQW 2141/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My Department is currently working on a policy for our Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and other protected landscape designations.

A discussion paper was sent to the Environment Committee for consideration last autumn. The committee replied recently, raising a number of further questions. Officials are addressing these and will reply to the Committee shortly.

When I have had the benefit of the Committee's further advice, I intend to issue a statement on the way forward. In this statement, I plan to outline what further AONB designations I intend to bring forward, in County Fermanagh and elsewhere in Northern Ireland. I will also indicate the likely timetable.

Area of Special Scientific Interest and Special Protection Area: Outer Ards

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of the Environment to list those organisations taking part in the consultation regarding the Outer Ards Special Protection Area/Area of Special Scientific Interest, which ends on 14 March 2002, and to consider extending this consultation period until June 2002, to allow those groups not on the list to take part in the consultation. (AQW 2163/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My Department has notified the following non-governmental organisations in connection with the designation of Outer Ards as an Area of Special Scientific Interest and Special Protection Area:

Royal Society for Protection of Birds
Ulster Wildlife Trust
Friends of the Earth
British Association for Shooting and Conservation
Rural Development Council
Northern Ireland Agriculture Producers Association
NI Birdwatchers Association
Ulster Museum
NI Federation of Sub Aqua Clubs
Ulster Farmers Union
Conservation Volunteers NI
North East Lobster Fishermen's Co-operative Society
NI Fish Producers Organisation
NI Fishery Harbour Authority
Ulster Angling Federation
NI Seafood Ltd
NI Environment Link
NI Sports Council
Northern Ireland Electricity
British Telecom

All known owners and occupiers of land within the designated area have also been notified.

I understand that a number of persons claiming to hold rights within the designated area may not have been formally notified. My officials are arranging to

serve notification on those parties recently identified, allowing three months for representations to be made. For others previously notified it remains the case that representations needs to be made by 15 March 2002.

Unless there are no substantial and valid objections, it remains my Department's intention to classify the SPA before the end of June 2002, at the same time as the ASSI is confirmed.

Badger Sett

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQO 754/01, and in line with the Cloughey case, if a restriction will be imposed on the Massey Avenue site for the period which work may be carried out. (AQW 2253/01)

Mr Nesbitt: As previously explained by my predecessor, Mr Foster, the development plans for 33 Massey Avenue have been modified so that the 'no development zone' around the badger sett will remain intact and unaffected by the proposed development.

In the Cloughey case, a time restriction was required on the timing of the work activity because the access to the site has to be constructed across the 'no development zone'. However, in the Massey Avenue case no restriction will be required on the period in which work may be carried out as no development will take place within the 'no development zone'.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list all Non-Departmental Public Bodies under his control, and to advise if they follow guidance on reporting fraud to the Comptroller and Auditor General, as required under Government Accounting procedures. (AQW 2010/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): The Department of Finance and Personnel has no executive Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs). However it does have responsibility for three advisory NDPBs, namely the Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee, the Statistics Advisory Committee, the Law Reform Advisory Committee, along with the Lay Observer. As none of these committees or the Lay Observer has responsibility for a budget, there is no requirement for them to adhere to the guidance as stipulated.

Any costs associated with the running of the committees are borne by the Department, which is obliged to follow the guidance on reporting fraud to the Comp-

troller and Auditor General, in accordance with Government Accounting procedures.

Decentralisation of Jobs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of personnel currently employed within his department and how many of these jobs may be decentralised between January and December 2002. (AQW 2036/01)

Dr Farren: The information requested is as follows:

At 1 January 2002 the Department of Finance and Personnel employed 2678* staff. As a result of a decision to centralise superannuation functions currently carried out within departments in the Belfast and North Down areas, around 40 jobs will be relocated in my department in Derry before the end of the year.

A strategic review of Civil Service Accommodation, which includes an examination of the scope for decentralisation of Civil Service jobs, is currently ongoing. Pending the outcome of the review, opportunities to relocate Civil Service jobs will continue to be examined on a case for case basis, as particular needs arise. Where there are considered to be pressing accommodation needs or where short-term decisions are required, business cases are prepared taking full account of the current relocation policy.

* Data is for NI Civil Service staff (industrial and non-industrial, permanent and casual) excluding those on a career break. NI Civil Service staff excludes civil servants in the Home Civil Service, NI Audit Office, Electoral Office and NI Court Service.

Official Transport

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQO 808/01, to detail the total cost of (a) providing an 'in-house' official car service for Ministers; and (b) providing a contracted official car service for Ministers. (AQW 2049/01)

Dr Farren: A study in late 2000 into the alternative means of providing official transport services for Ministers and senior officials found that the estimated of cost of an in-house service would be £637 K while an equivalent contracted service would cost £965 K.

Official Transport

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQO 808/01, to provide a breakdown of the £300,000 savings achieved from maintaining an in-house service as opposed to a contracted official car service. (AQW 2050/01)

Dr Farren: A study into the alternative means of providing official transport services estimated that an in-house service would cost on average of £7 per hour less than an equivalent contracted service. The estimated savings are calculated on requirement for approximately 46000 transport hours.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Consultancy Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money has been spent on external consultants and consultancy reports in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1953/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): My Department incurred costs as follows in each of the last 3 years:

Financial Year	Cost
1999/00	£753,542
2000/01	£1,705,228
2001/02 to date	£914,418

Seo a leanas na costais a gearradh ar an Roinn s'agam i ngach de na 3 bliain dheireanach.

Bliain Airgeadais	Costas
1999/00	£753,542
2000/01	£1,705,228
2001/02 go dtí an lá inniu	£914,418

GP Fundholding

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what negotiations and consultations she has had with GP fundholding representatives in relation to the imminent 31 March transfer of responsibility back to the Boards. (AQW 1957/01)

Ms de Brún: Over the past 2 years I have had wide ranging discussions with GP Fundholders and their representatives about the ending of the fundholding scheme. I have met with the General Medical Committee of the BMA on 3 occasions. I have also met with representatives of the Royal College of General Practitioners, the Eastern Multifund, the Northern Ireland GP Forum as well as a number of individual GP Fundholders.

HSS Boards have been given the responsibility of ensuring that, where possible, the level and range of services that have been developed by fundholders will continue after 31 March 2002. All Boards intend to

maintain the majority of those services at 2001/2002 levels for next year.

Le dhá bhliain anuas, bhí caibidlí forleathana agam le Ciste-shealbhóirí Gnáthdhochtúireachta agus lena n-ionadaithe faoi dheireadh a chur leis an scéim chiste-sheilbhe. Bhuail mé le Coiste Ginearálta Míochaine na CMB trí huair. Bhuail mé le hionadaithe an Choláiste Ríoga Ghnáthdhochtúirí, leis an Ilchiste Oirthearach, le Fóram Gnáthdhochtúireachta Thuaisceart na hÉireann fosta, chomh maith le roinnt Ciste-shealbhóirí aonair Gnáthdhochtúireachta.

Tá cúram glactha ag Boird SSS as cinntiú, más féidir é, go leanfaidh leibhéal agus réimse na seirbhísí a forbraíodh ag ciste-shealbhóirí i ndiaidh 31 Márta 2002. Tá rún ag na Boird go léir bunús na seirbhísí sin a choinneáil ag leibhéal 2001/2002 don bhliain seo chugainn.

Language Used

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) which language is used as the primary means of communication within her Department; (b) the normal timeframe for responding to a question in English; (c) the length of delay between the English response being available and the Irish translation being completed and made available to the Member. (AQW 1959/01)

Ms de Brún: English is the working language primarily used in my Department. Assembly Questions are answered in accordance with Assembly Business Office timescales and guidelines. All translations are completed within the normal timescales for answering questions and do not result in a delay in the answer being made available to the Member.

Is é Béarla an teanga oibre a úsáidtear go príomha sa Roinn s'agamsa. Freagraítear Ceisteanna Tionóil de réir achair ama agus treoirlínte Oifig Ghnó an Tionóil. Bíonn na haistriúcháin go léir déanta laistigh den ghnáthachar ama le ceisteanna a fhreagairt agus ní chuireann siad moill ar thabhairt an fhreagra don Bhall.

General Palliative Care Education Provision

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what new training is available for district and community nurses dealing with palliative care. (AQW 1962/01)

Ms de Brún: A wide range of appropriate General Palliative Care Education Provision is already accessible to district and community nurses to meet identified service needs. A Children's Palliative Care Project, which includes an Education Forum, has recently been established. A series of 5 road shows, exploring clinical topics relation to children's palliative care,

will commence shortly and run until early April. The Project Team is likely to address the need to develop further education opportunities.

Is féidir le haltraí ceantair agus pobail riachtanais aitheanta sheirbhísí réimse leathan Soláthar cuí Oideachais ar Chúram Mhaolaitheach Ghinearálta a chomhlíonann. Bunaíodh Scéim Chúraim Mhaolaithigh do Pháistí, ina bhfuil Fóram Oideachais, ar na mallaibh. Tosóidh sraith de 5 seó bóthair, ag scrúdú ábhar cliniciúil bainteach le cúram maolaitheach páistí, ar ball agus beidh siad ar siúl go dtí go luath i mí Aibreáin. Is dócha go dtabharfaidh Foireann na Scéime faoin ghá le tuilleadh deiseanna oideachais a fhorbairt.

NHS Trusts: Performance Indicators

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what performance indicators NHS Trusts are required to publish regularly.

(AQW 1963/01)

Ms de Brún: Trusts are required to produce both an audited set of annual accounts and an annual report, which they make available to the public. A wide range of other information is collected on Trust performance including Charter standards, reference costs, waiting lists, waiting times and information required to monitor progress towards targets etc. Much of this information is published routinely by the Department, by Boards or by Trusts themselves.

Bíonn ar Iontaobhais cuntais bhliantúla iniúchta agus tuairisc bhliantúil a chur ar fáil, a chuireann siad ar fáil don phobal. Bailítear réimse leathan eile sonraí faoi fheidhmiú Iontaobhais, caighdeáin Chairte san áireamh, costais thagartha, liostaí feithimh, agaí feithimh agus eolas eile atá de dhíth le dul chun cinn i dtreo spriocanna a mhonatóireacht srl. Déantar cuid mhór den eolas seo a fhoilsiú go rialta ag an Roinn, ag Boird nó ag Iontaobhais féin.

Consultancy Costs

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number and cost of consultations, reviews and other public discussion documents that have been issued by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the last 3 years.

(AQW 1966/01)

Ms de Brún: The number and cost of consultations and reviews that I have initiated since the establishment of the Executive are outlined in my answer to Assembly Question AQW 1490/2001.

Tugtar líon agus costas na gcomhairlithe agus na n-athbhreithnithe ar chuir mé tús leo ó bhunú an

Fheidhmeannais sa fhreagra a thug mé ar Cheist Tionóil AQW 1490/2001.

Working Partnerships

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration was given to facilitating a joint approach to issuing consultation, review and other public discussion documents by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety by Board, Trust or any other named agency responsible to the Department within the last 3 years.

(AQW 1967/01)

Ms de Brún: The Department seeks, where appropriate, to work in partnership with Boards, Trusts and other health, social services and public safety agencies on consultations, reviews and public discussion documents.

Iarrann an Roinn, más cuí é, ar chomhoibriú i bpáirtíocht le Boird, le hIontaobhais agus le seirbhísí eile sláinte agus sóisialta chomh maith le gníomhaireachtaí eile sábháilteachta poiblí ar chomhairliúcháin, athbhreithnithe agus ar phlé-cháipéisí poiblí.

Charter for Patients and Clients

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail which Hospital Trusts operate a Patient's Charter.

(AQW 1969/01)

Ms de Brún: A Charter for Patients and Clients was launched in 1992. All HSS Trusts are required to ensure that the minimum standards set out in the Charter are met and that appropriate mechanisms are in place to monitor the delivery of Charter standards at unit level.

Seoladh A Charter for Patients and Clients sa bhliain 1992. Ní mór do na hIontaobhais SSS go léir cinntiú go gcomhlíontar na híoschaighdeáin leagtha amach sa Chairt agus go bhfuil na struchtúir chúil i bhfeidhm le monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar chomhlíonadh chaighdeáin na Cairte ag leibhéal ionaid.

Diaphyseal Aclasis

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) males; and (ii) females currently diagnosed with Diaphyseal aclasis.

(AQW 1970/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not collected.

Ní chruinnítear an t-eolas seo.

Diaphyseal Aclasis

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of

money that goes into the research of Diaphyseal aclasis. (AQW 1971/01)

Ms de Brún: No specific research into diaphyseal aclasis is currently being funded by the HPSS R&D Office. No information is available on other sources of funding.

Níl saintaighde ar bith ar aeclaisís diaifíse maoinithe ag Oifig T&F na SSSP faoi láthair. Níl eolas ar fáil ar fhoinsí eile maoinithe.

Free Nursing Care for the Elderly: Legislation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has she any plans to amend legislation to ensure free nursing care for the elderly. (AQW 1972/01)

Ms de Brún: The measure to facilitate free nursing care will be carried in the Health and Personal Social Services No.1 Bill to be introduced in the Assembly in the coming weeks. Subject to the will of the Assembly, I intend that, from October this year, the cost of nursing care will not be included when assessing a person's ability to contribute towards the nursing home charge.

Beidh an beart le cúram altranais saor a éascú i mBille Uimh.1 na Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Pearsanta a thionscnófar sa Tionól sna seachtainí atá le teacht. Faoi réir toil an Tionóil, tá sé ar intinn agam gan chostas cúraim altranais a chur san áireamh ó Dheireadh Fómhair na bliana seo nuair a dhéanfar measúnú ar chumas duine cuid de tháille an tí altranais a íoc.

Residential Care Packages

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of pensioners benefiting from residential care packages in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1974/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on the number of residential care packages in effect in the Elderly Care Programme of Care at 31 March in each of the last three years is detailed in the table below. This information is published in the annual Community Statistics publication, which is available in the Assembly Library and on my Department's website.

Year	Residential care packages in effect
1999	2,549
2000	2,630
2001	2,939

Miondealaítear eolas ar líon na bpacáistí cúraim chónaithe i bhfeidhm sa Chlár Cúraim Chúram Seandaoine ar 31 Márta agus i ngach bliain de na trí bliana deireanacha sa tábla thíos. Foilsítear an t-eolas seo i bhfoilseachán bliantúil na Staitisticí Pobail, atá ar fáil i Leabharlann an Tionóil agus ar líonláithreán mo Roinne.

Bliain	Pacáistí Cúraim Chónaithe i bhfeidhm
1999	2,549
2000	2,630
2001	2,939

Support for Residential Care Pensioners

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to increase support for residential care pensioners. (AQW 1976/01)

Ms de Brún: I am currently considering proposals to further amend the Health and Personal Social Services (Assessment of Resources) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993 to introduce the 3-month disregard in April 2002 together with further increases in the capital limits for inflation.

Boards are required to allow residents an amount for their personal expenses each week and I am considering proposals to increase the Personal Expenses Allowance from April 2002.

Tá mé ag déanamh machnaimh faoi láthair ar mholtaí le Rialacháin (Measúnú Acmhainní) na Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Pearsanta (Tuaisceart na hÉireann) 1993 a leasú a thuilleadh chun an neamhshuim 3 mí mar aon le tuilleadh méaduithe sna cailcí caipitil do bhoilsciú a thionscnamh in Aibreán 2002.

Tá ar Bhoird suim airgid a cheadú do chónaitheoirí dá gcostais phearsanta féin gach seachtain agus tá mé ag déanamh machnaimh ar mholtaí leis an Liúntas do Chostais Phearsanta a mhéadú ó Aibreán 2002.

Financial Support: Residential or Nursing Home Care

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the financial support available for each pensioner in (i) nursing home care; and (ii) residential home care. (AQW 1989/01)

Ms de Brún: The Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 requires that a person is charged for residential or nursing home care arranged by a Board under Articles 15 and 36 of the Order. The Health and Personal Social Services (Assessment of Resources) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993, which are aligned with the test of eligibility for Income Support, prescribe the form of financial assessment to be applied in these circumstances. Where residents possess capital assets, including savings and property, in excess of £18,500 they are required to pay the full cost of their care. Financial support is given where the value of capital is below the threshold value but residents are also required to contribute from personal income in accordance with the regulations. The financial support

available to each resident is dependent on their individual circumstances and ability to contribute towards the residential care or nursing home charge.

In relation to nursing homes, new legislation is being brought before the Assembly shortly, and, subject to the will of the Assembly, will mean that from October this year, the cost of nursing care will not be included when assessing a person's ability to contribute towards the nursing home charge.

De réir Ord na Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Pearsanta (Tuaisceart na hÉireann) 1972 ní mór táille a ghearradh ar dhuine do chúram tí chónaithe nó altranais socraithe ag Bord faoi Ailt 15 agus 36 den Ord. Leagann Rialacháin (Measúnú Acmhainní) na Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Pearsanta (Tuaisceart na hÉireann) 1993, atá ceangailte leis an scrúdú intofachta do Thacaíocht Ioncaim, leagann siad amach foirm an mheasúnaithe airgeadais atá le cur i bhfeidhm sna tosca seo. Nuair atá sócmhainní caipítíl, airgead taisce agus sealúchas san áireamh, níos mó ná £18,500 ag cónaitheoirí, ní mór dóibh costas iomlán a gcúraim a íoc. Tugtar tacaíocht airgeadais nuair atá luach a gcaipítíl níos lú ná luach na tairsí ach ní mór do chónaitheoirí íoc as óna n-ioncam pearsanta féin de réir na rialachán. Braitheann an tacaíocht airgeadais atá ar fáil do gach cónaitheoir ar a dtosa aonair féin agus ar a gcumas cuid de tháille an tí chúraim chónaithe nó altranais a íoc.

Maidir le tithe altranais, tá reachtaíocht nua á cur faoi bhráid an Tionóil ar ball, agus, faoi réir toil an Tionóil, ciallóidh sí sin nach gcuirfear costas an chúraim altranais san áireamh ó Dheireadh Fómhair na bliana seo nuair a dhéanfar measúnú ar chumas duine cuid de tháille an tí altranais a íoc.

Nursing and Residential Homes: Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to increase payment to residential homes to cover the increasing cost of residential care for pensioners. (AQW 1990/01)

Ms de Brún: I am aware of the pressures facing nursing and residential homes and I will be considering their position in the decisions I will be making shortly on the allocation of my budget for 2002/03.

Tuigim na brúnna atá ar thithe altranais agus ar thithe cónaithe agus déanfaidh mé mo mhachamh ar a riocht sna cinní a dhéanfaidh mé ar ball ar dháileadh an bhuiséid s'agam do 2002/03.

Deficit: GP Fundholding

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current deficit from GP fundholding accounts. (AQW 1994/01)

Ms de Brún: The projected deficit in GP Fundholding for the 2001/02 financial year is £2,082,000. The major part of the deficit has arisen in fundholders' prescribing budgets.

Is é £2,082,000 an t-easnamh measta i gCiste-shealbhaíocht Ghnáthdhochtúireachta don bhliain airgeadais 2001/02. Tháinig an chuid is mó den easnamh seo ó bhuiséid oideas chiste-shealbhóirí.

Rape Crisis Centre

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the current level of resources for the Rape Crisis Centre and any future proposals for the development of its work.

(AQW 1995/01)

Ms de Brún: In the current year, the Department is making available a grant of up to £33,120.00 towards the central administration costs of the Belfast Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre. Award of a grant is, of course, subject to an organisation complying fully with the terms and conditions of the grant.

My Department has also made available £6,500 to assist the organisation in the development of a Business Plan with a clearly defined strategic focus.

Departmental officials have been in close contact with the Belfast Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre to help expedite the production of the Business Plan.

I mbliana, tá an Roinn ag cur deontais suas le £33,120.00 ar fáil chun cuidiú le lárchostas riaracháin Ionad Éignithe agus Drochíde Gnéasaí Bhéal Feirste. Bronntar deontais ar eagraíocht, ar ndóigh, ar acht go gcomhlíonann sí téarmaí agus coinníollacha an deontais go hiomlán.

Chuir mo Roinn £6,500 ar fáil fosta le cuidiú leis an eagraíocht Plean Gnó a fhorbairt le fócas straitéiseach léirithe go soiléir.

Bhí oifigigh na Roinne i dteagmháil dhlúth le hIonad Éignithe agus Drochíde Gnéasaí Bhéal Feirste le cuidiú leo luas soláthar Plean Gnó a ghéarú.

Occupational Therapist Posts

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of Occupational Therapist posts which have been (i) filled; and (ii) vacant for the last 2 years for which figures are available in each Health and Social Service Trust.

(AQW 1997/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is detailed in the tables below.

(I) OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST POSTS WHICH HAVE BEEN FILLED IN THE 2000 AND 2001 CALENDAR YEARS

	Posts filled during 2000		Posts filled during 2001	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Altnagelvin Group HSS Trust	-	-	-	-
Armagh and Dungannon HSS Trust	5	5	9	8.5
Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust	24	22.65	26	24.65
Causeway HSS Trust	2	2	4	4
Craigavon and Banbridge Community HSS Trust ¹	11	11	14	13.34
Craigavon Area Hospital Group HSS Trust	.	.	.	.
Down Lisburn HSS Trust	6	6	9	9
Foyle Community HSS Trust	2	2	13	13
Green Park Healthcare HSS Trust	9	8.65	11	9.8
Homefirst Community HSS Trust	16	15	22	21.5
Mater Infirmorum Hospital HSS Trust	1	1	6	6
Newry & Mourne HSS Trust	3	3	1	1
North & West Belfast HSS Trust	2	2	8	7.6
Royal Group of Hospitals HSS Trust	11	11	8	8
South & East Belfast HSS Trust	4	4	6	5.9
Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust	2	2	2	2
Ulster Community & Hospitals Group HSS Trust	10	9.05	14	13.5
United Hospitals HSS Trust	-	-	-	-

¹ Combined figures for Craigavon & Banbridge Community and Craigavon Area Hospital Group.

- Not applicable

N/A Not available

(II) OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST POSTS WHICH WERE VACANT AT THE END OF THE 2000 AND 2001 CALENDAR YEARS

	Posts vacant at end of 2000		Posts vacant at end of 2001	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Altnagelvin Group HSS Trust	-	-	-	-
Armagh and Dungannon HSS Trust	2	2	2	1.67
Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust	1	1	2	2

	Posts vacant at end of 2000		Posts vacant at end of 2001	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Causeway HSS Trust	1	0.5	3	2.5
Craigavon and Banbridge Community HSS Trust ¹	2	1.78	2	2
Craigavon Area Hospital Group HSS Trust	.	.	.	.
Down Lisburn HSS Trust	1	1	8	8
Foyle Community HSS Trust ²	N/A	N/A	4	3.6
Green Park Healthcare HSS Trust	N/A	N/A	3	2.6
Homefirst Community HSS Trust	6	5	6	5
Mater Infirmorum Hospital HSS Trust	1	1	2	2
Newry & Mourne HSS Trust	0	0	2	1.5
North & West Belfast HSS Trust	4	3.38	7	6
Royal Group of Hospitals HSS Trust	2	2	4	4
South & East Belfast HSS Trust	N/A	N/A	9	9
Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust	N/A	N/A	4	3.5
Ulster Community & Hospitals Group HSS Trust	3	3	2	2
United Hospitals HSS Trust	-	-	-	-

¹ Combined figures for Craigavon & Banbridge Community and Craigavon Area Hospital Group.

² Current vacancies

- Not applicable

N/A Not available

(I) POIST THEIRIPITHE SAOTHAIR A LÍONADH SNA BLIANTA FÉILIRE 2000 AGUS 2001.

	Poist líonta le linn 2000		Poist líonta le linn 2001	
	Líon	CLA	Líon	CLA
Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa Alt na nGealbhan	-	-	-	-
Iontaobhas SSS Ard Mhacha & Dhún Geanainn	5	5	9	8.5
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	24	22.65	26	24.65
Iontaobhas SSS an Chlocháin	2	2	4	4
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna ¹	11	11	14	13.34
Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon	.	.	.	.

	Poist líonta le linn 2000 Líon CLA		Poist líonta le linn 2001 Líon CLA	
	Iontaobhas SSS an Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach	6	6	9	9
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal an Fheabhail	2	2	13	13
Iontaobhas SSS Chúram Sláinte na Páirce Glaise	9	8.65	11	9.8
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Homefirst	16	15	22	21.5
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann an Mater	1	1	6	6
Iontaobhas SSS an Iúir & Mhúrn	3	3	1	1
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	2	2	8	7.6
Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa Ríoga Otharlann	11	11	8	8
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Theas & Thoir	4	4	6	5.9
Iontaobhas SSS Speirín Tír na Lochanna	2	2	2	2
Iontaobhas Grúpa Otharlanna & Pobail Uladh	10	9.05	14	13.5
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Aontaithe	-	-	-	-

¹ Figiúirí curtha le chéile do Ghrúpa Otharlanna Phobal Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna agus Cheantar Craigavon
Neamhfhoirsteanach
N/F Níltear ar fáil

(II) FOLÚNTAIS PHOIST THEIRIPITHE SAOTHAIR AG DEIREADH NA MBLIANTA FÉILIRE 2000 AGUS 2001.

	Folúntais phost ag deireadh bhliain féilire 2000 Líon CLA		Folúntais phost ag deireadh bhliain féilire 2001 Líon CLA	
	Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa Alt na nGealbhan	-	-	-
Iontaobhas SSS Ard Mhacha & Dhún Geainn	2	2	2	1.67
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	1	1	2	2
Iontaobhas SSS an Chlocháin	1	0.5	3	2.5
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna ¹	2	1.78	2	2
Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa Otharlann Ceantair Craigavon	.	.	.	.
Iontaobhas SSS an Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach	1	1	8	8
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal an Fheabhail ²	N/A	N/A	4	3.6

	Folúntais phost ag deireadh bhliain féilire 2000 Líon CLA		Folúntais phost ag deireadh bhliain féilire 2001 Líon CLA	
	Iontaobhas SSS Chúram Sláinte na Páirce Glaise	N/A	N/A	3	2.6
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Homefirst	6	5	6	5
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann an Mater	1	1	2	2
Iontaobhas SSS an Iúir & Mhúrn	0	0	2	1.5
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	4	3.38	7	6
Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa Ríoga Otharlann	2	2	4	4
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Theas & Thoir	N/A	N/A	9	9
Iontaobhas SSS Speirín Tír na Lochanna	N/A	N/A	4	3.5
Iontaobhas Grúpa Otharlanna & Pobail Uladh	3	3	2	2
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Aontaithe	-	-	-	-

¹ Figiúirí curtha le chéile do Ghrúpa Otharlanna Phobal Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna agus Cheantar Craigavon

²Folúntais faoi láthair
Neamhfhoirsteanach
N/F Níltear ar fáil

MMR Vaccine

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to ensure that there are sufficient reserves of vaccine to address an outbreak of Measles. (AQW 2011/01)

Ms de Brún: There is no evidence of an outbreak of measles here in the past few years. As long as our uptake rates for the MMR vaccine remain high, at around 90%, there is no likelihood of an outbreak. I can, however, confirm that there is a sufficient stock of MMR vaccine here to respond to an outbreak if one should occur.

Níl fianaise de ráig bhruitíní ann le blianta beaga anuas. A fhad is go bhfanann rátaí piocúlachta don vacsaín MMR ard, thart faoi 90%, níl dóchúlacht ann go mbeidh ráig ann. Is féidir liom cinntiú, ámh, go bhfuil stoc sách de vacsaín MMR anseo le freagairt ar ráig dá mbeadh ceann ann.

Outbreaks of Measles

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Board area, the number of outbreaks of Measles there have been in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2012/01)

Ms de Brún: There have been no confirmed cases of measles here in the last three years.

Níor cinntíodh cás ar bith de bhruitíneach anseo le trí bliana anuas.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list all Non-Departmental Public Bodies under her control, and to advise if they follow guidance on reporting fraud to the Comptroller and Auditor General, as required under Government Accounting procedures. (AQW 2013/01)

Ms de Brún:

There are five Non Departmental Public Bodies within my control. These are :

- The National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting in Northern Ireland;
- The Northern Ireland Council for Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education;
- The Mental Health Commission for Northern Ireland;
- The Northern Ireland Fire Authority; and
- The Northern Ireland Social Care Council.

All Non Departmental Public Bodies are required to inform the Department immediately on discovery of a loss or suspected loss to public funds or property as a result of theft, misappropriation or malicious damage.

A summary of any reports received are submitted monthly to the Internal Audit Development Unit, Department of Finance and Personnel.

All Non Departmental Public Bodies comply with these requirements.

Tá cúig Fhorais Phoiblí Neamh-Rannacha faoi mo stiúradh. Seo iad:

- An Bord Náisiúnta um Altranas, Chnámhseachas, agus um Chuartaíocht Sláinte i dTuaisceart Éireann;
- Comhairle Thuaisceart Éireann um Oideachas Míochaine agus Déadach Iarchéime;
- Coimisiún Sláinte Meabhrach Thuaisceart Éireann;
- Údarás Dóiteáin Thuaisceart Éireann; agus
- Comhairle Cúraim Shóisialta Thuaisceart Éireann.

Ní mór do na Forais Phoiblí Neamh-Rannacha go léir cur in iúl don Roinn má thagann siad ar chailliúint nó ar chailliúint mheasta airgid ó na cistí poiblí nó sealúchais de dheasca gadaíochta, cúblála nó damáiste mhailísigh.

Tugtar achoimre ar thuairisc ar bith faighte don Ionad Forbartha Iniúchta Inmheánaigh sa Roinn Airgeadais agus Pearsanra go míosúil.

Cloíonn na Forais Phoiblí Neamh-Rannacha go léir leis na coinníollacha seo.

Fracture Beds

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of beds in the amalgamated Royal Victoria Hospital and Belfast City Hospital fracture service to date compared to pre-amalgamation. (AQW 2024/01)

Ms de Brún: Prior to amalgamation in November 1999, there were 55 fracture beds at the Royal Victoria Hospital and 49 at Belfast City Hospital. Post- amalgamation, there are currently 90 fracture beds at the Royal Victoria Hospital, but it is planned to increase these to 98 if additional resources can be secured.

Roimh a gcónasc i Samhain 1999, bhí 55 leaba d’othair le bristeacha in Otharlann Ríoga Vichteoiria agus 49 leaba in Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste. I ndiaidh a gcónaisc, tá 90 leaba d’othair le bristeacha in Otharlann Ríoga Vichteoiria faoi láthair, ach tá sé pleanáilte iad seo a mhéadú go 98 leaba más féidir tuilleadh acmhainní a fháil.

Fracture Operating List

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of fracture service operating lists per week since the amalgamation of the Royal Victoria Hospital and Belfast City Hospital fracture services and (b) the figures for fracture operating list in the 3 years prior to amalgamation. (AQW 2025/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) Prior to amalgamation there were 12 fracture service operating lists per week at the Royal Victoria Hospital and 10 per week at Belfast City Hospital. Post-amalgamation there are 27 per week at the Royal Victoria Hospital.
 - (b) This information is not readily available in the form requested and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.
- (a) Roimh a gcónasc bhí 12 liosta feidhmithe seirbhíse briste an tseachtain in Otharlann Ríoga Vichteoiria agus 10 ceann an tseachtain in Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste. I ndiaidh a gcónaisc, tá 27 liosta an tseachtain ann in Otharlann Ríoga Vichteoiria.
 - (b) Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil go réidh san fhoirm iarrtha agus ní fhéadfaí é a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

High Dependency and Intensive Care Beds

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) where the 33 extra high dependency unit and ICH beds have been located and (b) how many are actually staffed today.

(AQW 2026/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) The information regarding the location of the extra high dependency unit and intensive care unit beds is set out in the table below:

Location	High Dependency and Intensive Care beds
Belfast City Hospital	5
Royal Victoria Hospital	8
Ulster Hospital	6
Altnagelvin Hospital	7
Antrim Area Hospital	4
Craigavon Area Hospital	3
Total	33

- (b) Intensive Care and High Dependency beds are staffed as demand requires.

- (a) Tá an t-eolas maidir le láthair na leapacha in ionaid ardspleáchríocha agus in ionaid dhianchúram leagtha amach sa tábla thíos:

Láthair	Leabacha ardspleáchríocha agus dianchúram
Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	5
Otharlann Ríoga Vichteoiria	8
Otharlann Uladh	6
Otharlann Alt na nGealbhan	7
Otharlann Cheantar Aontroma	4
Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon	3
Iomlán	33

- (b) De réir éilimh a chuirtear líon foirne le freastal ar leapacha Dianchúram agus Ardspleáchríocha.

Trauma & Orthopaedic Surgery

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (a) maximum (b) average and (c) minimum waiting time for Orthopaedic surgery over the past 3 years.

(AQW 2031/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on completed waiting times for operations in the Trauma & Orthopaedic Surgery speciality is available and is detailed in the table below.

Year	Waiting Time in Days		
	Minimum ¹	Maximum ²	Average
1998/99	0	4,467	199
1999/00	0	3,301	101
2000/01	0	3,458	88

¹Surgery completed on the day of admission with no waiting.

²Figures relate to a small number of people whose operations have been deferred for clinical reasons.

Tá eolas ar agáí feithimh críochnaithe le haghaidh obráidí i speisialtacht Máinliachta Tráma agus Ortaipéidí ar fáil agus léirithe sa tábla thíos.

Bliain	Agáí Feithimh ar bhonn Laethanta		
	Íosmhéid ¹	Uasmhéid ²	Meán
1998/99	0	4,467	199
1999/00	0	3,301	101
2000/01	0	3,458	88

¹Mianlucht críochnaithe ar an lá iontrála gan fanacht

²Baineann figiúirí le roinnt bheag daoine ar cuireadh a n-obráid ar ceal toise fáthanna clinicúla.

Wallace Day Centre, Lisburn

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what improvements, if any, will be made in the provision of services and facilities for young people with learning disabilities generally and specifically at Wallace Day Centre, Lisburn.

(AQW 2033/01)

Ms de Brún: I understand that a review of the facilities at Wallace Avenue Day Centre is being undertaken by Down Lisburn Trust with a view to enhancing the physical environment and developing the service provision.

Tuigim go bhfuil athbhreithniú á dhéanamh ag Iontaobhas an Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach ar na háiseanna in Ionad Lae Ascaill Wallace agus é ar intinn acu cur leis an timpeallacht fhisiciúil agus soláthar na seirbhísí a fhorbairt.

Decentralisation of Jobs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of personnel currently employed within her department and how many of these jobs may be decentralised between January and December 2002. (AQW 2037/01)

Ms de Brún: Currently 983 staff are employed in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and, of these, 37 are located in Derry. There are no plans for decentralisation during 2002.

Sa Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí tá 983 duine fostaithe agus, as seo, tá 37 lonnaithe i nDoire. Níl pleananna chun dílárú a dhéanamh le linn 2002.

Organ Donation

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken to promote awareness of organ donation.

(AQW 2042/01)

Ms de Brún: There is a growing need for organ donations and I am anxious to encourage more people to join the organ donor register. Over the last year, I supported a number of local events to promote the register and I will continue to do so. My Department is working with the NI Kidney Research Fund to explore options for promoting organ donation, including the development of new literature. My Department also displays posters and leaflets encouraging people to join the organ register at a range of public buildings, including Health Centres, hospitals, dental surgeries, libraries and District Council Offices.

Tá méadú ann sa ghá le deontuithe orgán agus tá mé ar bís le níos mó daoine a spreagadh le clárú le clár na ndeontóirí orgán. I rith na bliana seo a chuaigh thart, thacaigh mé le roinnt imeachtaí áitiúla leis an chlár a chur chun cinn agus leanfaidh mé ar aghaidh é seo a dhéanamh. Tá mo Roinn ag obair le Ciste TÉ um Thaighde ar Duáin le roghanna a scrúdú do chur chun cinn deonú orgán, forbairt leabhrán nua eolais san áireamh. Cuireann mo Roinn póstaer agus bileoga ar taispeáint fosta ag spreagadh daoine le clárú leis an chlár orgán i réimse foirgneamh poiblí, móide in Ionaid Shláinte, otharlanna, i gclínici déadacha, i leabharlanna agus in Oifigí Chomhairlí Ceantair.

Screening For Breast Cancer

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people over 65 were screened for breast cancer in (i) 2000; and (ii) 2001.

(AQW 2043/01)

Ms de Brún: In 2000, 769 women aged 65 and over were screened for breast cancer here. The equivalent figure for 2001 is 882.

Sa bhliain 2000, scrúdaíodh 769 bean 65 bliain d'aois agus níos sine d'ailse chíche anseo. Is é 882 bean an figiúr don bhliain 2001.

Adolescent Psychiatric Beds

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many beds for young

people with mental health problems are currently available, in each Board area. (AQW 2044/01)

Ms de Brún: South & East Belfast Trust currently provides six regional adolescent psychiatric beds. These are available for use by all four Boards. Work is underway to provide an extra 10 regional beds.

Solráthraíonn Iontaobhas Bhéal Feirste Theas & Thoir sé leaba shíciatracha réigiúnacha d'ógánaigh faoi láthair. Tá siad ar fáil do na ceithre Bhord uile. Tá obair ar siúl le 10 leaba réigiúnach bhreise a sholáthar.

Depression

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people, in each Board area, are currently diagnosed with depression, broken down by (i) gender; and (ii) age.

(AQW 2045/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil.

Adolescent Psychiatric Treatment

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children and young adults have been referred for adolescent psychiatric treatment in the South and East Belfast HSS Trust.

(AQW 2069/01)

Ms de Brún: The number of children and young adults referred for adolescent psychiatric treatment in the South and East Belfast HSS Trust from January 2001 to December 2001 was 187.

Ba é 187 líon na bpáistí agus na n-aosach óg a atreoraíodh i dtaca le cóireáil shíciatrach ógánach in Iontaobhas SSS agus Bhéal Feirste Theas agus Thoir ó Eanáir 2001 go Nollaig 2001.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to review the current services available for young people who have been diagnosed with a mental health illness.

(AQW 2072/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department, as part of the review of mental health policy and legislation, will be reviewing child and adolescent mental health.

Déanfaidh an Roinn s'agam, mar chuid den athbhreithniú ar pholsaí agus reachtaíocht sláinte meabhrach, athbhreithniú ar shláinte meabhrach páistí agus ógánach.

Mental Illness

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what level of funding has been provided for young people diagnosed with a mental health illness, broken down by NHS Board Area, in each year since 1999. (AQW 2073/01)

Ms de Brún: The level of funding provided for young people diagnosed with mental illness, broken down by Health Board Area from 1999 is:

Year	SHSSB	NHSSB	WHSSB	EHSSB
1999/2000	£425,000	£845,190	£1,056,070	£1,106,460
2000/2001	£560,000	£1,080,422	£1,134,508	£1,142,600
2001/2002	£650,000	£1,555,500	£1,262,432	£1,482,654

Is é leibhéal maoinithe a chuirtear ar fáil d'ógánaigh a bhfuil tinneas meabhrach orthu, breactha síos de réir Ceantar Bord Sláinte ó 1999 ná:

Bliain	BSSSD	BSSST	BSSSI	BSSSO
1999/2000	£425,000	£845,190	£1,056,070	£1,106,460
2000/2001	£560,000	£1,080,422	£1,134,508	£1,142,600
2001/2002	£650,000	£1,555,500	£1,262,432	£1,482,654

Orthopaedic Surgery: Waiting Lists

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the waiting lists for orthopaedic surgery in each Health Board area since 1999. (AQW 2074/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on waiting lists is collected on a quarterly basis by specialty. Details of persons waiting for inpatient admission or first outpatient appointments in the Trauma & Orthopaedics specialty for each quarter since March 1999 is detailed in Tables 1 and 2 below.

TABLE 1. PATIENTS AWAITING ADMISSION TO HOSPITAL IN EACH BOARD IN THE TRAUMA & ORTHOPAEDICS SPECIALTY

Quarter ending	Board of Treatment	Time Waiting (months)					Total
		0-2	3-11	12-17	18-23	24+	
Mar 1999	EHSSB	1,236	2,183	674	296	297	4,686
	WHSSB	191	198	102	39	33	563
Jun 1999	EHSSB	1,193	2,156	688	347	396	4,780
	WHSSB	161	227	79	48	26	541
Sep 1999	EHSSB	980	2,204	632	424	446	4,686
	WHSSB	150	263	50	51	20	534
Dec 1999	EHSSB	1,162	1,932	605	419	459	4,577
	WHSSB	193	227	30	15	8	473
Mar 2000	EHSSB	1,128	1,811	630	394	514	4,477
	WHSSB	222	221	30	2	0	475
Jun 2000	EHSSB	1,077	1,876	661	384	608	4,606
	WHSSB	176	342	30	5	3	556
Sep 2000	EHSSB	905	1,894	597	411	660	4,467
	WHSSB	274	378	38	8	3	701
Dec 2000	EHSSB	1,116	1,736	572	389	600	4,413
	WHSSB	250	463	48	8	1	770
Mar 2001	EHSSB	1,170	1,818	657	347	595	4,587
	WHSSB	261	456	76	5	0	798
Jun 2001	EHSSB	1,065	1,944	749	360	689	4,807
	WHSSB	223	507	80	16	0	826
Sep 2001	EHSSB	977	1,991	637	471	625	4,701
	WHSSB	261	501	115	22	2	901

TABLE 2. PATIENTS WAITING FOR FIRST OUTPATIENT APPOINTMENT IN EACH BOARD IN THE TRAUMA & ORTHOPAEDICS SPECIALTY

Quarter ending	Board of Treatment	Time Waiting (months)					Total
		0-2	3-11	12-17	18-23	24+	
Mar 1999	EHSSB	2,457	2,561	331	64	109	5,522
	WHSSB	947	901	223	78	2	2,151
Jun 1999	EHSSB	2,907	2,677	510	90	122	6,306
	WHSSB	1,096	1,079	222	86	7	2,490

Quarter ending	Board of Treatment	Time Waiting (months)					Total
		0-2	3-11	12-17	18-23	24+	
Sep 1999	EHSSB	2,820	3,554	671	199	138	7,382
	WHSSB	923	1,542	223	121	29	2,838
Dec 1999	EHSSB	2,484	3,564	695	312	150	7,205
	WHSSB	907	1,859	283	150	9	3,208
Mar 2000	EHSSB	2,801	3,725	766	410	359	8,061
	WHSSB	931	1,803	339	141	8	3,222
Jun 2000	EHSSB	3,211	4,095	1,012	478	398	9,194
	WHSSB	842	1,703	454	30	19	3,048
Sep 2000	EHSSB	3,088	4,863	1,571	576	566	10,664
	WHSSB	811	1,399	522	107	23	2,862
Dec 2000	EHSSB	2,690	4,758	1,725	759	737	10,669
	WHSSB	827	1,131	317	111	42	2,428
Mar 2001	EHSSB	3,075	4,251	1,897	1,057	866	11,146
	WHSSB	978	895	218	137	57	2,285
Jun 2001	EHSSB	2,924	4,622	2,168	1,179	1,150	12,043
	WHSSB	1,140	1,124	184	130	114	2,692
Sep 2001	EHSSB	2,673	4,576	2,152	1,381	1,503	12,285
	WHSSB	1,049	1,420	143	31	5	2,648

Bailítear eolas de réir speisialtacha ar liostaí feithimh ar bhonn ráithiúil. Tá sonraí ar dhaoine ag fanacht le hiontráil othair chónaithigh nó leis na chéad

choinní othair sheachtraigh i speisialtacht Tráma & Ortaipéidic do gach ceathrú ó Mhárta 1999 léirithe i dTáblaí 1 agus 2 thíos.

TÁBLA 1. OTHAIR AG FANACHT LE HIONTRÁIL D'OTHARLANN I NGACH BORD I SPEISIALTACHT TRÁMA & ORTAIPÉIDIC

Deireadh ráithe	Bord Cóireála	Am ag Fanacht (míonna)					Iomlán
		0-2	3-11	12-17	18-23	24+	
Márta 1999	BSSSO	1,236	2,183	674	296	297	4,686
	BSSSI	191	198	102	39	33	563
Meitheamh 1999	BSSSO	1,193	2,156	688	347	396	4,780
	BSSSI	161	227	79	48	26	541
Meán Fómhair 1999	BSSSO	980	2,204	632	424	446	4,686
	BSSSI	150	263	50	51	20	534
Nollaig 1999	BSSSO	1,162	1,932	605	419	459	4,577
	BSSSI	193	227	30	15	8	473
Márta 2000	BSSSO	1,128	1,811	630	394	514	4,477
	BSSSI	222	221	30	2	0	475
Meitheamh 2000	BSSSO	1,077	1,876	661	384	608	4,606
	BSSSI	176	342	30	5	3	556
Meán Fómhair 2000	BSSSO	905	1,894	597	411	660	4,467
	BSSSI	274	378	38	8	3	701
Nollaig 2000	BSSSO	1,116	1,736	572	389	600	4,413
	BSSSI	250	463	48	8	1	770
Márta 2001	BSSSO	1,170	1,818	657	347	595	4,587
	BSSSI	261	456	76	5	0	798
Meitheamh 2001	BSSSO	1,065	1,944	749	360	689	4,807
	BSSSI	223	507	80	16	0	826
Meán Fómhair 2001	BSSSO	977	1,991	637	471	625	4,701
	BSSSI	261	501	115	22	2	901

TÁBLA 2. OTHAIR AG FANACHT LEIS AN CHÉAD CHOINNE SEACHTRACH I NGACH BORD SA SPEISIALTACHT TRÁMA & ORTAIPÉIDIC

Deireadh ráithe	Bord Cóireála	Am ag Fanacht (míonna)					Iomlán
		0-2	3-11	12-17	18-23	24+	
Márta 1999	BSSSO	2,457	2,561	331	64	109	5,522
	BSSSI	947	901	223	78	2	2,151
Meitheamh 1999	BSSSO	2,907	2,677	510	90	122	6,306
	BSSSI	1,096	1,079	222	86	7	2,490
Meán Fómhair 1999	BSSSO	2,820	3,554	671	199	138	7,382
	BSSSI	923	1,542	223	121	29	2,838
Nollaig 1999	BSSSO	2,484	3,564	695	312	150	7,205
	BSSSI	907	1,859	283	150	9	3,208
Márta 2000	BSSSO	2,801	3,725	766	410	359	8,061
	BSSSI	931	1,803	339	141	8	3,222
Meitheamh 2000	BSSSO	3,211	4,095	1,012	478	398	9,194
	BSSSI	842	1,703	454	30	19	3,048
Meán Fómhair 2000	BSSSO	3,088	4,863	1,571	576	566	10,664
	BSSSI	811	1,399	522	107	23	2,862
Nollaig 2000	BSSSO	2,690	4,758	1,725	759	737	10,669
	BSSSI	827	1,131	317	111	42	2,428
Márta 2001	BSSSO	3,075	4,251	1,897	1,057	866	11,146
	BSSSI	978	895	218	137	57	2,285
Meitheamh 2001	BSSSO	2,924	4,622	2,168	1,179	1,150	12,043
	BSSSI	1,140	1,124	184	130	114	2,692
Meán Fómhair 2001	BSSSO	2,673	4,576	2,152	1,381	1,503	12,285
	BSSSI	1,049	1,420	143	31	5	2,648

Rates of Pay

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the rate of pay received by 'service assistants' in each of the local Health Trusts, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2092/01)

Ms de Brún: The details requested cannot be provided, as 'service assistant' is not a recognised staff grade in the Health and Personal Social Services.

Ní féidir liom na sonraí iarrtha a sholáthar mar nach n-aithnítear 'cúntóir seirbhíse' mar ghrád foirne sna Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Pearsanta.

Mental Health Treatment

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what projects aimed at supporting young people with mental health problems are currently being funded by the Department. (AQW 2105/01)

Ms de Brún: There are no specific projects aimed at supporting young people with mental health problems currently being funded by the Department.

Níl tionscail ar leith ann a mhaoinítear ag an Roinn faoi láthair a bhfuil sé mar aidhm acu tacú le hógánaigh a bhfuil fadhbanna sláinte meabhrach acu.

Agency Nurses

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money was spent by the NHS in meeting the cost of employing agency nurses in each year since 1998. (AQW 2106/01)

Ms de Brún: Information in the form requested is not held centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Níl an t-eolas sa dóigh ar iarradh é i dtaisce go lárnach agus ní thiocfadh é a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Consultancy Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how much money has been spent on external consultants and consultancy reports in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1912/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): Actual spend on consultancy services in the past 3 years is as follows:

Dec1999-March 2000	£560,875.95
April 2000-Mar 2001	£1,462,007.22
April 2001 to date	£2,621,036.96
Total	£4,643,920.13

Pedestrian Crossing: Criteria

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister for Regional Development what are the criteria upon which the provision of a pedestrian crossing are based.

(AQW 1948/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service receives a great many requests for the provision of controlled pedestrian crossing facilities. To ensure a consistent and equitable approach, requests are assessed using criteria based on national guidelines.

This further consideration takes into account a number of factors including vehicle speed, road geometry, proximity to shops, schools, community centres, hospitals etc, and accident history. Based on this detailed assessment potential sites are prioritised accordingly.

Security: Marlborough House, Craigavon

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total cost of providing security at Marlborough House, Craigavon for each of the last 3 financial years.

(AQW 1993/01)

Mr P Robinson: The total cost of providing security (excluding VAT) at Marlborough House, Craigavon for each of the last three financial years was as follows:

1999/00	£135,968.51
2000/01	£144,020.56
2001/02	£148,000.00 (estimate to end of financial year)

Key Transport Corridors

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development, in respect of the proposed Regional Transportation Strategy, to detail (a) the length of key transport corridor per constituency; and (b) the length of existing or proposed key transport corridor, per constituency, that is or will be of dual carriageway status.

(AQW 2018/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service does not have readily available detailed information on the length of Key Transport Corridors by constituency. To obtain the information on this basis could only be done at disproportionate cost. I have however placed in the Library a map showing the Key Transport Corridor network and the sections which are currently motorway and dual carriageway standard.

My predecessor, Gregory Campbell and the Chief Executive of Roads Service wrote to you and other elected representatives on 26 September 2001 and 11 October 2001 respectively, regarding the consultation process informing the formulation of the Roads Service 10-Year Forward Planning Schedule. The Schedule will identify those schemes (including dual carriageway schemes) which, it is anticipated, could be funded and started within the 10-year period of the Regional Transportation Strategy.

Appendices 2 and 3 attached to the Chief Executive's letter of 11 October, gave an indication of the sections of new road network where upgrading to dual carriageway standard is being considered. I have also provided a copy of those appendices in the Library.

The Proposed Regional Transportation Strategy is currently out for consultation until 16 April 2002 and, in preparing the final draft Strategy, my Department would be happy to carefully consider any comments that you or your constituents wish to make.

Tamlaght Road Roundabout

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to improve traffic flow at the Tamlaght Road roundabout on the Omagh Throughpass.

(AQW 2020/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has no plans at this time to implement a scheme aimed at improving traffic flow at the Tamlaght Road roundabout on the Omagh Throughpass.

Decentralisation of Jobs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of personnel currently employed within his department and how many of these jobs may be decentralised between January and December 2002.

(AQW 2035/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Department for Regional Development currently employs a total of 4,963 staff. This total is made up of 2,996 non-industrial staff and 1,967 industrials.

A Strategic Review of Civil Service Accommodation, which includes an examination of the scope for decentralisation of Civil Service jobs, is currently ongoing. Pending the outcome of the review, opportunities to relocate Civil Service jobs will continue to be examined on a case by case basis, as particular needs and issues arise. Where there are considered to be pressing accommodation needs or where short-term decisions are required, business cases are prepared taking full account of the current relocation policy.

Due to the operational nature of its main functions (ie, provision and maintenance of roads and water/sewerage services), DRD is already a widely-dispersed Department, with a recent survey finding that over 61% of its staff are based at locations outside the Greater Belfast area. This figure may be even higher if staff in certain specialised and purpose-built buildings (eg, stores, depots, pumping stations) were also to be taken into account.

At present, the Department has no plans to implement any major decentralisation of jobs during the year 2002. Any significant accommodation or staff relocation proposals would be considered within the context of the above-mentioned Review and of Departmental business needs.

Townland Names

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Regional Development how he has encouraged the use of townland names in written communications. (AQW 2140/01)

Mr P Robinson: My department's policy is to use townland addresses when the person has clearly indicated that they wish this to be included in any correspondence. Equally, my Department will also use the townland name to reply to correspondence when the address given includes the specific townland name.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Consultancy Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how much money has been spent on external consultants and consultancy reports in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1955/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): The amount spent in the last three years in my Department on external consultants and consultancy reports is as follows:

Financial Year	Cost
1999/00	£2,412,104
2000/01	£3,127,690
2001.02	£2,090,109

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how many households, by electoral ward within the constituency of South Belfast, are entitled to winter fuel payment. (AQW 2000/01)

Mr Dodds: This information is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Social Housing Provision

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development, to detail the Housing Executive's plans for housing provision in (a) Omagh; and (b) Strabane District Council areas over the next three years.

(AQW 2014/01)

Mr Dodds: Current plans for social housing provision in Omagh and Strabane District Council areas are as shown in the table below. The projects will be undertaken by housing associations. In summary the position is as follows:

OMAGH

On Site	
2001/02	1 project with 1 home
Programmed to start	
2002/03	1 project with 20 homes
2003/04	2 projects with 14 homes
2004/05	2 projects with 8 homes

STRABANE

On Site	
2001/02	2 projects with 10 homes
Programmed to start	
2002/03	4 projects with 32 homes
2003/04	2 projects with 13 homes
2004/05	no projects currently planned

The social housing programme is a three-year rolling programme, which my Department updates annually in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The Housing Executive's role is to continually re-assess housing need. Year 1 is firm, but at each annual roll forward, the plans for Years 2 and 3 are updated to take account of changing needs and priorities.

HOUSING ASSOCIATION NEW BUILD PROGRAMME – OMAGH AND STRABANE

Year	Provider	Location	Units	Type of Housing
Omagh				
Currently on site	North & West	Ballinamullan Road, Ph1a, Omagh	1	Family
2002/03	SHAC	General Hospital, Omagh	20	Single Homeless

Year	Provider	Location	Units	Type of Housing
2003/04	North & West	Drumquin, Omagh	6	Family
	HA to be identified	Omagh	8	Learning Disabilities
2004/05	HA to be identified	Omagh	4	Family
	HA to be identified	Omagh	4	Vulnerable Young People
Strabane				
Currently on site	North & West	Cottages, Ph3, Strabane	8	Family
	North & West	Cottages, Ph3A, Strabane	2	Family
	North & West	Clady, Strabane	8	Family
2002/03	North & West	Cottages, Ph4, Strabane	7	Family
	North & West	Cottages, Ph5, Strabane	4	Family
	Ulidia	Upper Main Street, Strabane	13	Singles/Couples
2003/04	North & West	Rural Cottages, Ph5B, Strabane	5	Family
	HA to be identified	Strabane	8	Learning Disabilities
2004/05	NIL			

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development to list all Non-Departmental Public Bodies under his control, and to advise if they follow guidance on reporting fraud to the Comptroller and Auditor General, as required under Government Accounting procedures. (AQW 2016/01)

Mr Dodds: My Department has responsibility for 6 Non-Departmental Public Bodies as follows:

- Northern Ireland Housing Executive
- Liganside Corporation
- Charities Advisory Committee
- Disability Living Allowance Advisory Board
- Rent Assessment Panel
- Vaughan's Charity.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Liganside Corporation follow the guidance on reporting fraud. While the remaining Bodies have no responsibility for the disbursement of public monies, my Department ensures that Government Accounting procedures are

followed in respect of the Bodies' administrative expenditure.

Decentralisation of Jobs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to indicate the number of personnel currently employed within his department and how many of these jobs may be decentralised between January and December 2002. (AQW 2034/01)

Mr Dodds: There is currently a total of 8,484 staff employed in the Department for Social Development of whom 2,332 are based outside of the Greater Belfast area. Whilst no specific plans exist to increase the number of posts based outside of Belfast between January and December 2002, departmental officials continue to work with colleagues in other departments to examine the scope for decentralisation of civil service jobs as set out in the Programme for Government.

Emergency Repair Work: Housing Executive Homes

Ms Gildernew asked the Minister for Social Development how he intends to improve the timescale for emergency repair work to be carried out on Housing Executive homes within the Dungannon area. (AQW 2048/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive is undertaking a fundamental review of its maintenance service which will examine all aspects of the repair service, including emergency repair work. However, the Executive is currently achieving its targets for completion of emergency repairs, including Immediate Call Out repairs, in the Dungannon area.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by electoral ward, the number of claimants in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance who were found to be claiming fraudulently in each of the last 24 months. (AQW 2057/01)

Mr Dodds: A breakdown by electoral ward is unavailable. However a breakdown by Social Security Office of the number of confirmed fraud cases, in each of the last 2 years, by customers in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance is attached.

Benefit Office	Number of Cases	
	2000	2001
Andersonstown	39	61
Antrim	51	27
Armagh	21	33

Benefit Office	Number of Cases	
Ballymena	45	72
Ballymoney	36	72
Ballynahinch	7	26
Banbridge	22	34
Bangor	56	63
Carrickfergus	33	17
Coleraine	72	98
Cookstown	15	45
Corporation Street	32	92
Downpatrick	30	60
Dungannon	26	58
Enniskillen	102	136
Falls Road	31	52
Foyle	56	101
Hollywood Road	41	117
Kilkeel	11	17
Knockbreda	35	39
Larne	17	18
Limavady	30	65
Lisburn	49	53
Lisnagelvin	53	76
Lurgan	28	21
Magherafelt	26	60
Newcastle	30	31
Newry	91	82
Newtownabbey	25	38
Newtownards	23	74
Omagh	49	68
Portadown	22	29
Shaftsbury Square	91	31
Shankill	14	28
Strabane	84	77
Total	1,393	1,971

Grouped Housing Scheme: Travelling Community

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the grouped housing scheme for the travelling community, to detail (a) the proportion of costs attributed to the provision of work spaces; (b) the estimated maintenance cost of each unit in the group; and (c) the estimated unit cost of each scheme in comparison with the cost for NIHE houses.

(AQW 2114/01)

Mr Dodds: There are currently 4 pilot grouped housing schemes proposed for the travelling community one at Tattykeel in Omagh, now complete, one at Hillhead Road in Magherafelt, currently under construction and

2 in Belfast, one at Glen Road and the other at Monagh Road which are still under consideration. The Omagh scheme has 8 units, the Magherafelt scheme will have 5 units and it is proposed that each of the Belfast sites will have 16 units.

At Glen Road and Monagh Road it is understood that each scheme will contain a community house but it is yet to be considered whether these will be eligible for housing association grant. Additional workspaces are provided at the Omagh site and are also planned for the Magherafelt site. Details are as follows:

- Omagh - A stable block and paddock area costing £85,000.
- Magherafelt - An area costing £15,000 designated for the retention of scrap.

The Department considers these to be non-qualifying costs and they will not therefore attract housing association grant.

The 2 Belfast schemes are still at an early stage of development and have not yet been submitted for approval. Only the cost per unit within the Omagh and Magherafelt schemes can be provided at this point. The actual cost per unit within the Omagh and Magherafelt schemes, excluding all non-qualifying costs, is as follows;

- Omagh - £85,300 (actual cost per unit)
- Magherafelt - £126,166 (estimated final completion cost per unit)

It is difficult to provide an estimate for maintenance costs since only the Omagh scheme has been completed (in December 2001). The Housing Association responsible for this scheme has set aside £324 per unit per annum for maintenance as opposed to £216 per unit for traditional needs housing.

Responsibility for the provision of social housing now lies with Housing Associations and not NIHE. The estimated cost per unit for a Housing Association to build 8 two storey family dwellings to lifetime home standards on the Omagh site and 5 on the Magherafelt site would be £78,120 and £99,471 respectively.

The costs for the Belfast schemes are not yet available. The total cost for the schemes at Omagh and Magherafelt including the cost of non-housing grant aided work is as follows:

- Omagh - £767,404
- Magherafelt - £650,830

Based on these figures the unit costs for the schemes at Omagh and Magherafelt are as follows:

- Omagh - £95,925
- Magherafelt - £130,166

Grouped Housing Scheme: Travelling Community

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the number of grouped housing schemes undertaken for the travelling community; (b) the number of units proposed in each scheme; (c) the cost per unit within each scheme; (d) the cost of each unit in comparison with the cost per unit of those built by a housing association; (e) the community facilities proposed in each scheme; (f) the total cost for each grouped housing scheme; and (g) the unit cost for each grouped housing scheme. (AQW 2115/01)

Mr Dodds: There are currently 4 pilot grouped housing schemes proposed for the travelling community one at Tattykeel in Omagh, now complete, one at Hillhead Road in Magherafelt, currently under construction and 2 in Belfast, one at Glen Road and the other at Monagh Road which are still under consideration. The Omagh scheme has 8 units, the Magherafelt scheme will have 5 units and it is proposed that each of the Belfast sites will have 16 units.

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Student Loan: Income-Related Benefits

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development to make it his policy that a student loan, which provides financial assistance towards costs incurred while in Third Level education and as a repayable debt regardless of uptake, should not be classified as income for a person in receipt of Social Security benefits.

(AQW 2135/01)

Mr Dodds: Full-time students are not normally eligible to claim income-related benefits. The policy remains that students should be supported through the educational maintenance system. However, certain students in vulnerable groups, for example, lone parents or disabled students, are eligible to claim Income Support and Housing Benefit.

When deciding a claim for an income-related benefit most income is taken into account. A student loan is taken into account as available income whether or not the student has applied for it. There are existing disregards from student loan income, such as amounts intended for travel or for books and equipment. Also, a further £?10 of the weekly amount of a student loan may be disregarded, subject to the over-riding limit of £20 on disregarded income of students. To ignore the rest of the student loan income available to students, which is intended for everyday living expenses, would be unfair to other claimants of similar means and circumstances.

There are no plans to change this policy.

Sheltered Accommodation for Vulnerable Women: Fermanagh

Ms Gildernew asked the Minister for Social Development, following the closure of Women's Aid in Fermanagh, what steps will be taken to provide sheltered accommodation for vulnerable women in Fermanagh.

(AQO 904/01)

Mr Dodds: Ulidia Housing Association constructed an 11-bedroom Women's Aid Refuge in Enniskillen in

1991 with financial assistance from the Department of the Environment. The refuge was managed by Women's Aid under a joint management agreement. At the request of Women's Aid the facility was closed approximately 2 years ago due to lack of use. The premises are now occupied by young physically disabled people.

Women's Aid is currently in discussion with the Housing Executive with a view to utilising a Housing Executive dwelling for use as a refuge facility. A property has been identified and arrangements are being made to consult adjoining residents. Further discussion will be arranged with Women's Aid to develop the proposal.

The Housing Executive already has a number of properties in Fermanagh that are used for temporary accommodation placements for vulnerable women.

Social Security Services

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Social Development to detail his plans to improve the delivery of social security services for people who live in rural areas.

(AQO 872/01)

Mr Dodds: The Social Security Agency has a comprehensive network of local Social Security Offices. To deliver its service to the people in Northern Ireland customers can call at any of these offices for information about any social security matter, advice on which benefits to claim and assistance with filling forms. This is the biggest and most extensive network of government offices in Northern Ireland. Alternative arrangements are also in place for customers who might experience difficulties in calling at a Social Security Office, for example

- jobseekers who live in rural areas are able to confirm their Job-search activities by post;
- increasingly home visits to customers are available where information, advice and assistance with form filling services are provided; and
- staff from Social Security Offices regularly provide benefit awareness seminars at venues in rural areas.

The Agency is also embarking on a Modernisation Programme which over the next few years will see a number of measures introduced to improve the delivery of services. These include major refurbishment of the local offices, and simpler application processes such as tele-claims, which should be of particular advantage to people in rural areas.

Waiting List for Housing Executive Properties: South Belfast

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the number of individuals on the Housing Executive's waiting list for the constituency of South Belfast; and (b) what steps are being taken to meet the need for social housing in this area. (AQO 903/01)

Mr Dodds: The waiting list is not constituency based. I can say, however, that in the Housing Executive's District 7 area, which forms the bulk of the constituency, there are 1,012 on the waiting list. A number of those on the waiting list will be housed through relets but in terms of new housing in the past 3 years there has been an average of 357 houses built per year. The new build programme from 1999/00-2005/06 includes proposals for 553 units, 48 of which have already been completed. Site acquisition in South Belfast continues to pose a problem as a consequence of high land values and competition from the private sector.

House Sales Policy

Ms Armitage asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any situation where the Northern Ireland Housing Executive continued with the House Sales Policy in areas where it has no new build programmes.

(AQO 874/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive has applied its House Sales policy across Northern Ireland, irrespective of the location of new build programmes which are now undertaken by Housing Associations.

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